Oppose USW threats and lies! Launch a national strike to overturn the government-dictated sellout contract!

Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee
17 March 2022

To join the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email oilworkersrfc@gmail.com.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The United Steelworkers leadership is using every dirty trick in the book to push through its four-year agreement, which would substantially reduce our real take home pay and give the oil bosses a free hand to cut jobs, endanger our lives, and destroy the conditions of the next generation of refinery and petrochemical workers.

At BP, the USW is trying to ram through the national contract at a vote today without releasing the full deal and giving workers enough time to study and discuss it. As one brother at the BP refinery in Whiting, Indiana told us, “There is still no info on the contract we are voting on Thursday. Unreal. I heard through the grapevine we can go view the 32-page document at the hall after work. Six weeks of talks and we get a couple hours to read it and decide. It's not a valid vote...it's a cattle call.”

At USW Local 11-470 at the Phillips 66 refinery in Billings, Montana, the USW International forced workers to re-vote on the national agreement after they rejected it on March 4. During an “informational meeting” two days later, national USW reps told workers if they voted down the contract then they would be on an economic strike, in which the company would be free to terminate all union members and hire back whoever they wanted without any contract protections.

In other words, the USW is threatening us, not the company, with strike action. It is telling us: “If you strike, we will leave you on your own, starve you on the picket line, and if you are fired, you will be on your own.” To drive this threat home, the USW is holding up the example of the Beaumont, Texas workers, who the USW left on the picket lines for 10 months before signing a deal with ExxonMobil that gutted seniority rights, job classifications and quadrupled the probationary period to 24 months, creating a new tier of lower paid at-will employees to replace senior workers.

This cannot stand. We have to fight and overturn this miserable deal. We urge our brothers and sisters at BP and the other companies to vote it down and to build the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee to prepare a national strike.

From the beginning, the USW has operated as an enemy of rank-and-file workers. Oil workers were never in a stronger position to fight than this year. The companies are making record profits. Several key refineries, including Marathon’s Galveston Bay Refinery, were down for various reasons as the contract expired. Rather than striking when the iron was hot and when the companies were most vulnerable, the USW ordered us to stay on the job.

Then after weeks of telling us Marathon and the other oil giants were refusing to seriously negotiate, USW President Tom Conway suddenly announced on February 25 that he had reached an agreement with “substantial gains” for workers. But the deal was essentially identical to the one the union rejected February 1. In a recent press release, Conway boasted that he had signed a “responsible contract,” which “did not add to inflationary pressures.”

In fact, the deal will impose all the inflationary pressures on the backs of workers. It includes a first year raise of only 2.5 percent and an average of three percent annually over four years. With inflation running at 7.9 percent and sure to rise in coming months, this means by the end of four years we will have suffered a major reduction in our living standards. We will not be able to keep up with fast rising prices for fuel, food or the outrageous co-pays and other out-of-pocket medical expenses contained in this contract.

© World Socialist Web Site

The USW's adamant opposition to strike action must be seen within the context of the Biden administration's increasingly dangerous military confrontation with Russia after the invasion of Ukraine. Conway announced this deal the day after the invasion, and three days after the USW president took part in a virtual White House meeting with President Biden, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks. While the White House and the USW have kept the content of the discussion secret, there is no doubt Biden told Conway in no uncertain terms that he had to settle the contract and block a strike that could shut down two-thirds of the country's refinery capacity. In other words, this is a government-dictated contract, which will rob us and reward the oil bosses!

No class-conscious worker would support Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But the US and NATO pushed Putin into a corner through the eastern expansion of NATO and massive military buildup on Russia's borders. Despite the crocodile tears the big business politicians in Washington are shedding for the Ukrainian people, they are being used as pawns in the US government's regime change operation in Russia, which is aimed at turning Russia into a colony of the US and European powers. The same giant energy firms, which are waging a war against us, are licking their chops over the possibility of seizing the vast oil and gas reserves of Russia—just like they did in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, which was sold to us with lies about "weapons of mass destruction."

There is another major factor is this reckless war drive: the Biden administration and the corporate media are creating an external enemy to rally against, so workers don't fight our real enemies, which are at home!

They're telling oil workers, railroad workers, dock workers and others we cannot strike because we'll "disrupt the economy" and undermine "national defense," even as the war profiteers in the oil and defense industries laugh all the way to the bank.

We are not idiots—and we are certainly not slaves. We have every right to carry out an "economic strike," no matter what Conway and his high-paid henchmen on the regional and local level say.

As we said in our founding statement, the OWRFC urges workers to reject any contract that does not include the following:

•A 40 percent raise and the restoration of Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA);

•Restoration of the 8-hour day;

•Expansion of paid time off, including a six-week vacation during the first year of service and one month of paid paternity leave;

•Fully paid medical benefits;

•The hiring of more full-time workers;

•The establishment of worker-run health and safety committees and the abolition of corrupt joint labor-management committees;

•Workers' control over production rates and input over capital expenditures;

•Fully paid pensions and retiree medical benefits after 25 years of service;

•The elevation of contractors to full-time positions, with the same pay and benefits.

The USW has kept us from using our enormous strength to win these demands. That is why we formed the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OWRFC). Our committee seeks to unite workers throughout our industry, including the tens of thousands of contract workers who are being used as cheap labor. They are our class brothers and sisters too!

But we cannot fight the giant corporations and their bought-and-paid-for political parties alone. That is why our committee will unite oil workers with striking Minneapolis teachers, the BNSF and Canadian Pacific railroad workers, the dock workers in California, Oregon and Washington whose contracts expire in July, and the millions of other workers fighting against the sacrifice of our lives and livelihoods to corporate profit.

We are working for global corporations, which can only be fought by uniting energy workers across all national boundaries. American workers have more in common with the workers of Russia, China, Mexico and other countries than they do with the billionaires and corporate-controlled politicians in the US. It is only through our common struggle that we can finally put an end to the pandemic and the danger of new wars over oil and other resources, and guarantee that we, the workers, who create all of society's wealth, can have a future free from want, inequality and the horrors of war.

To join the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email oilworkersrfc@gmail.com.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site