

USW tries to isolate striking Richmond, California Chevron workers just as strike slows West Coast production

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26 March 2022

Over 500 oil workers at Chevron's Richmond Oil Refinery in the San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California will enter their second week of strike Monday. The workers are under immediate danger of being sold out by the United Steel Workers (USW), which plans to enter into "negotiations" with company officials next Monday.

According to the company, approximately 3,000 employees and contractors work at, or are in direct connection with, the Richmond Refinery. As the USW and other unions continue systematic efforts to isolate workers, workers outside of USW Local 5, which voted to strike, are left to fend for themselves, with the unions ordering workers to cross picket lines.

One Richmond refinery worker who is not in the USW told the WSWS:

[Members of the union which organizes my trade] have been ordered to cross the USW picket line at the Richmond Refinery in California. There are numerous pipe fitters working as contractors at the refinery and more will be brought in. They also were ordered to cross the picket lines at the [nearby] Tesoro Martinez Refinery [during its strike] in 2015. There was a large rat inflated on the picket line with the Building Trades contractors name highlighted during that long strike. The leadership at the local has always had zero solidarity. Workers who do not follow their commands face not being employed and kept on the out of work list. A disgusting group of people to say the least. The Chevron electricians

at the refinery are represented by [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW)] Local 302 in Martinez, California. They have been told to follow their conscience and are not crossing.

Following the announcement of the strike, non-USW workers at the facility received a letter from Richmond Refinery Director Tolly Graves which threatened the workers with reduced pay and benefits unless they cross USW picket lines.

In other words, only about one-sixth of the refinery's workforce was even given a real opportunity to participate in the strike, while the others were deliberately disorganized to limit the impact of the strike.

The USW Local 5 web page contains no mention of the current strike.

Concurrently with the strike—and possibly resulting from the company's efforts to continue operations during the strike—a hydrotreater at the refinery has broken down. This has caused a massive drop in production and corresponding further rise in prices.

Following a February 22 meeting between USW President Tom Conway and US President Joe Biden, the USW reached a "pattern agreement" on February 25 with multiple companies. The agreement applies to about 30,000 workers at the majority of oil refineries in the country, including Chevron workers in California, Utah, Texas, Mississippi and Louisiana.

The agreement will raise workers' wages by a mere 12 percent over four years, or 3 percent per year on average, far below the current nominal inflation rate in

the US of about 8 percent. In fact, Chevron workers have seen health care premiums and other out-of-pocket expenses rise by 28 percent in the last year alone due to previous USW givebacks.

While not all of the respective union locals have ratified their separate versions of the agreement, Chevron Richmond Refinery workers are the only ones thus far to launch a strike. In defiance of union blackmail tactics, Richmond Refinery workers voted twice to reject the contract, demanding an additional 5 percent raise, shorter work hours and improved health and safety protections.

The rest of the approximately 30,000 USW oil workers who are presumably to come under the agreement have thus far been kept at their jobs by the USW.

In the face of the USW's high-pressure tactics, including isolation from striking Richmond workers, approximately one thousand USW Local 675 workers at the Chevron El Segundo Refinery near Los Angeles voted on Wednesday to ratify their own version of the USW agreement.

The passage of the agreement in El Segundo means that the union is attempting to prevent a simultaneous strike at Chevron's two major West Coast refineries.

According to Reuters, the Richmond and El Segundo refineries combined produce about 20 percent of all gasoline and aviation fuel in California. A Chevron website boasts, "Approximately 65 percent of planes at major airports in the Bay Area use jet fuel made at the Richmond Refinery."

Aviation fuel is vital for the US's current war plans against Russia. This consideration could only have figured prominently in the Biden administration's decision to participate in forcing the contract on workers.

The February 25 deal also followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, which had been provoked by the US government and its NATO allies. The war, which threatens to disrupt a large portion of international trade in oil and gas, has already caused gasoline prices to soar internationally.

On Friday, Australia, Britain, Canada and the US imposed bans on the purchase of oil from Russia. Accordingly, US-based companies such as Chevron, which have ended operations in Russia, stand to profit not only from rising prices generally, but also from

increased market share at the expense of Russian companies and other major international oil companies such as BP, Shell and Total, which are heavily invested in the Russian oil industry and will require much more time to divest from it.

Thus, it bears emphasis that that this means that Chevron and other US-based companies stand to reap further accelerated profits from the Ukraine-Russian war crisis.

In order to break out of union-imposed isolation, Chevron workers must broaden the strike and carry out a real fight for their vital demands. Last month, oil workers from multiple plants and companies formed the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OWRFC) for this very purpose. The OWRFC published a statement on Tuesday in support of the Richmond Refinery strike and raising the following demands:

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

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

Are you an oil worker in Richmond or another facility? Contact us and give us your comments on expanding the strike.



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