

Determined Richmond, California Chevron workers join global movement against spiraling cost of living

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The situation confronting 600 striking Chevron oil workers in Richmond, California, encapsulates the irrationality of the capitalist system: Skyrocketing oil prices greatly enrich a tiny layer of executives and shareholders who add nothing to the production process. But this same rise in the cost of living makes it harder and harder for workers who actually refine the oil to fill their own cars with the gas they need to drive to work.

The corporate media has effectively ignored the strike, which is now in its second week, for fear that it will trigger a broader movement against the cost of living among workers in all industries and in every country. There is a growing movement of workers in the US and across the world against rapidly rising food and gas costs exacerbated by the war in Ukraine between the US/NATO and Russia. The emerging movement for higher wages spans from 5,000 teachers in Sacramento and 40,000 grocery workers in Southern California to truckers in Spain and teachers in Iran and Sudan.

The strike began after the Richmond workers voted down two local contracts pushed by the United Steelworkers, which is patterned on the union's national agreement for 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers. USW President Tom Conway has boasted that the pro-company deal, which includes an average annual raise of only 3 percent over the next four years, will not "add to inflationary pressures."

In Richmond, the USW is helping the company by keeping workers in the dark. Though negotiations supposedly took place Wednesday, the USW provided workers with no substantive information about what happened.

Even though the USW is staffed by bureaucrats making over \$100,000 or \$200,000 a year and has assets of \$1.5 billion, workers angrily report that the USW has not yet paid out any pay from the union's giant "Strike & Defense Fund." Many workers did not even know when they would begin receiving checks, and for what amount.

Workers must understand this for what it is: a blatant attempt by the USW to end the strike on terms favorable to the company.

In an interview with Reuters yesterday, USW Local 5 Vice President BK White said the company was employing delay tactics to "see how many of our people will cross the picket line."

First, workers have reported that it is other unions at the plant who are the ones ordering workers to cross USW picket lines.

Moreover, if the USW says the company is delaying, then why has the USW delayed immediate payment of adequate strike pay to replace lost earnings, which is the most effective way to prevent workers from being pressured into returning to work? On Wednesday, the WSWS called Local 5 headquarters and asked a union official when workers would begin receiving strike pay, but the official said he could not answer and the WSWS did not receive a call back.

The truth is that the USW and Chevron are not "negotiating" against one another, they are working together to conspire against the workers and to break their strike.

A *World Socialist Web Site* campaign team visited picket lines and were immediately confronted by USW bureaucrats who yelled at workers, ordering them not to speak to the WSWS. This did not deter workers from readily discussing their reasons for striking with WSWS reporters. Out of concern over retribution from the USW and Chevron, the workers asked to use pseudonyms.

The workers' have many different concerns, including safety and unpaid "stand-by" time, but the most urgent according to most workers was the rising cost of living.

Janice, a worker with 14 years of experience at the plant, said she found the company's 2.5 percent wage increase offer to be insulting. "My main issue is pay," she said. "Every contract we get closer to the minimum wage. A 2.5 pay increase is a pay cut. I went to put gas in my Yukon the other day and it wouldn't fill up all the way because the pump wouldn't go above \$100."

Jim, a younger worker, told the WSWS, "Health care is a major issue. The payments on our Kaiser health care plan just went way up. On top of this the cost of living is going way up. Rent is \$2,400 to \$2,500 for a three-bedroom place, and that's still far away from the refinery. People have to move farther and farther away because they cannot afford to live in the Bay Area. I live an hour from work and gas costs \$6 a gallon."

Nancy, who has worked at the refinery for 20 years, said, "The company attempted to coerce us with a \$2,500 signing bonus, which after tax is just a mere drop in the bucket. And there is not enough transparency from the union. Many unions are having their members cross our picket lines right now, though not all of them."

There is profound discontent among the workers over the impact of the pandemic, which has seriously impacted their families and coworkers. While masses of working people have suffered greatly

during this period, both physically and financially, the ruling class has used the pandemic to enrich itself even further, keeping production going as 1 million people died in the US alone.

“Two years into this pandemic, we have been the ones keeping things going,” Nancy said. “We have been making the gas so all the nurses and doctors can get to the hospital, we have been making gas so the oxygen trucks can make deliveries. And now management is working as scabs in the refinery, but they have spent the last two years sitting at home safely.”

Don, another striker, told the WSWS, “As for COVID, we had nine or 10 people out with COVID on a daily basis testing positive. And if you are out sick for a while, they will write you up for it even if you have COVID. If you take up half your sick time, they give you a ‘step,’ and under the absence control program, three steps can lead to a firing. And when the contract ended, we went from being ‘essential workers’ to having the police from four different agencies get called out on us. The company painted a property line at all the gates to intimidate us.”

Striking Chevron workers were eager to learn about the newly formed Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OWRFC), an organization controlled by oil workers themselves aimed at carrying forward their struggle and linking Richmond workers with oil workers across the US and the world.

If workers want to win their demands, it is urgent that they organize among themselves, to coordinate action, share accurate information and communicate with one another and their coworkers at other oil plants.

The OWRFC calls for an understanding among workers that there will be no return to work until the company meets the following demands:

- a 40 percent raise and the restoration of cost-of-living adjustments (COLA)
- abolition of forced overtime and the restoration of the eight-hour day
- expansion of paid time off
- an end to unpaid “standby”
- fully paid medical benefits
- the hiring of more full-time workers
- worker-run health and safety committees
- 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.

In a statement to the striking workers, a veteran Marathon Petroleum worker in Texas and member of the OWRFC said, “The striking workers in Richmond should know that the issues over which they have decided to strike are not unique to them, as the USW would have them believe. USW national and local reps used intimidation and other thuggish tactics to push through an illegitimate agreement, the contents of which were all but written by the government.

“The union’s goons have told workers at all locals that they were the only ones willing to strike over the deal, which ensures a

reduction in the standard of living for all workers through real wage reductions over the next four years. When workers called the union’s bluff, USW officials pointed to the example of the ExxonMobil workers in Beaumont, letting them know in no uncertain terms that, should workers dare go against the union’s wishes and seek a better deal through the traditional means, a work stoppage, the USW would isolate those workers and slowly starve them into eventual capitulation, at which point they would end up with a worse contract than the one they initially voted against.

“The union is without doubt letting these workers in Richmond believe that they were the only ones unhappy with this four-year agreement, but that could not be further from the truth.

“Chevron workers should know that the OWRFC was founded by and for workers who are tired of the USW’s lies and false ‘solidarity,’ and that we stand ready to fight with them for the fair contracts we all deserve. The agreement that was forced to ratification with underhanded strategies benefits the oil companies for whom we work, who are making unbelievable profits due to this administration’s warmongering, and the myriad other companies who see profits soar during international military conflict rather than the workers who keep these facilities running and generating necessary products.

“We all experienced the greed of these corporations during the height of the pandemic, as they expected us ‘essential workers’ to continue performing our duties at the risk of the health and well-being of ourselves and our loved ones. Now, they demand more sacrifice from us so they can continue to make obscene profits and increase the value returned to their shareholders through higher dividends and multi-billion-dollar stock buybacks.

“We will not allow this to happen; the workers can and must work together to ensure that we are not further marginalized and subjected to worse working conditions and lower wages while also suffering from the effects of inflation, which is at a level not seen for several decades, and the breakdown of the global supply chain. United, we have the ability, and responsibility, to ensure that we, and the next generation of oil workers, can adequately provide for ourselves and our families the lives that we all deserve.”

Oil workers, contact the WSWS to discuss your struggle, report information to your fellow workers, learn more about the OWRFC and the fight to expand the Richmond strike. We respect anonymity.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact