

“The company puts our lives in danger to save pennies”

Striking Chevron workers denounce unpaid “standby” policy and other oppressive conditions at California oil refinery

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Striking Chevron workers in Richmond, California, explained that their demands to return to work include not only substantial pay increases but an end to the brutal “standby” policy whereby workers are forced to be constantly on call, even on their days off, without any compensation.

Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* about their opposition to the policy and their demands regarding other staffing and safety issues at the Bay Area refinery. The workers, who used pseudonyms to protect themselves from retribution, expressed frustration that the corporate media has never asked them their reasons for striking.

“One major issue we are striking over is no pay for standby,” said Rebecca, an experienced worker at the refinery. “A unit is on standby 18 times in a 28-day cycle, and these 18 standby shifts must be shared by around 5 to 10 people. That means that for those standby shifts, you can’t travel, you can’t do anything, you just have to be on call to go to work.”

This was a common demand of the workers who spoke to the WSWWS on the picket lines. Workers also denounced the use of “force-out” time, which is mandatory overtime for which workers can be scheduled with little advanced warning.

“Standby and force-out are safety issues,” said Tom, another striking worker. “The company puts our lives in danger to save pennies. They don’t hire enough. Because of this, we are forced in a lot, and this causes fatigue. Your sleep suffers. Your family life suffers. And when you’re on stand-by, you can’t have a life. You have to wake up super early and plan your day like

you’ll get called in. And now they have managers working in there, which is not safe. You are going to see flaring, and there have been some incidents. You could see skies getting cloudy, the homes around here could stink from chemicals. You could see fires.”

Workers are growing bolder in their demands while the United Steelworkers union keeps them in the dark about the status of talks with the company. In reality, there are no “negotiations” taking place whatsoever. The USW and Chevron are not negotiating like opponents; they are conspiring with each other against the workers, dragging the strike out in order to break workers’ resolve, isolate them, withhold strike pay (despite USW’s \$1.5 billion in assets) and force them to give in.

This comes amid growing concerns on Wall Street that a decline in global production of gasoline, diesel and jet fuel, caused by the war in Ukraine between the US/NATO and Russia, places US oil workers in an extremely powerful position. In an article published in Thursday’s *New York Times*, analysts expressed concerns that American oil workers are essential to refine fuel that is necessary to the functioning of increasingly stretched global supply chains.

The *Times* writes:

Refineries, which turn crude oil into fuels that can be used in cars and trucks, have tried to play catch-up on both sides of the Atlantic in recent months. But they have not been able to make more diesel, gasoline and jet fuel fast enough.

That is in part because refineries have closed in Europe and North America in recent years and more of the world's fuels are being refined in Asia and the Middle East.

U.S. diesel exports to Europe have, in turn, helped drive up prices domestically by reducing supplies. That could become a bigger problem. Diesel stockpiles in the United States have been dropping over the last year and a half, and are at their lowest levels in eight years, according to the Energy Department. "There is some terror" in the diesel market right now, said Linda Salinas, vice president for operations at Texmark Chemicals.

The oil corporations and USW are certainly filled with terror over the prospect that the strike in Richmond will spread to other refineries, where workers were coerced by the USW into voting for the contract to back the Biden administration's decision to prosecute its reckless war against Russia and keep inflation down. USW President Tom Conway has boasted that his aim is to force through contracts with wage increases that are so low that they will not "add to inflationary pressures."

There is growing popular support among oil workers and workers in other industries for the strike in Richmond.

A post on the social media site Imgur, based on the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of the Chevron strike went viral Thursday, reaching more than 86,000 views at present. In the comment section, fellow USW members complained that they had not heard anything about the Chevron walkout, confirming that the USW is deliberately keeping its membership in the dark about the strike.

One worker wrote, "I'm a USW union member and I haven't heard about any other union walking out." This was even though they are "actually doing negotiations right now." A member from USW Local 2-1005 in Michigan agreed, "this is the first I've heard about the Chevron thing."

A former worker at the Richmond refinery wrote in response to the *WSWS* article, "I worked there when it was OCAW (Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union)." They said, "Oil companies treat

workers like a resource to be exploited then thrown away, just like land." A former USW member also wrote in response to the post that they were not happy with the "lack of accountability for senior members."

Workers across the US have established the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OWRFC), an organization that is independent of Chevron and the USW and whose aim is to share information among 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers and broaden the struggle beyond Richmond.

The OWRFC calls for 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.

Oil workers, contact us 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.



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