

# Support grows to break USW isolation of California Chevron strike

I.L. Sassoon  
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The walkout by 600 Chevron oil refinery workers in Richmond, California will enter its third week Monday. While the strike has coincided with mass protests and strikes across the US and internationally over the rising costs of living, the United Steelworkers (USW) has worked with the giant energy company to isolate the strike and impose an austerity contract in Richmond.

The strike at Richmond broke out March 21 after workers voted down two local agreements negotiated by USW Local 5, which were based on the sellout national agreement the USW imposed on 30,000 refinery and petrochemical workers at 12 companies across the country. It included a 12 percent wage increase over four years, or roughly 3 percent annually.

USW Local 5 is currently demanding an additional 5 percent wage increase over the life of the contract, roughly 4.25 percent annually, far short of the US nominal inflation rate of roughly 8 percent. Due to the high cost of housing in the Bay Area, workers drive long distances to work and rising fuel costs—California has the highest in the nation—have hit their paychecks hard. In addition, due to the substandard healthcare benefits, out-of-pocket healthcare costs for Chevron workers have risen by 23 percent in the last year alone.

Workers on the picket lines have told the WSWS they are demanding “standby” pay because they are often required to be on call to report to work, making it impossible to even schedule the most basic tasks. They also want an end to exhausting and dangerous work schedules and greater safety protections at the facility.

The strike has the potential to galvanize working class support throughout the oil industry, as many refinery workers and transport workers are experiencing the same exploitative conditions.

Michael, a Bay Area tanker truck driver, told the WSWS, “I support the strike in Richmond

unconditionally. Chevron workers should be paid more and WTL [Williams Tank Lines, a trucking company] workers should be paid more too.

“We are waiting 90 minutes at the rack today [to pick up the gas], all the WTL guys were asleep. They are being crushed, most are away from their families, and they are not paid as much as Chevron employees. There is a shared struggle here against the management.”

The USW has attempted to keep workers isolated and force the Chevron workers to accept the same deal the union imposed on workers throughout the industry, through a campaign of intimidation and lies. Although the oil companies have been reaping huge profits, which have risen even more sharply since the invasion of Ukraine, USW President Tom Conway hailed his agreement as a “responsible contract” and one that does not “add to price and inflationary pressures.”

The national agreement was announced only a few days after Conway met with President Joe Biden and top-ranking cabinet officials. While the content of this meeting has been kept secret, it is almost certain that Biden made clear that he did not want any major strikes disrupting oil production amid the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

After workers at the Phillips 66 refinery in Billings, Montana voted down their contract earlier, the USW International forced through a revote. Throughout the country the USW held “informational meetings” with workers at Marathon and other companies, at which they claimed the company would fire all the workers in the event of a strike. A Marathon worker in Washington state told the WSWS that the USW told workers they “will be alone with no USW support” if they went on strike.

A few days into the Richmond strike, the USW worked to avert a second strike at Chevron by rapidly

reaching a deal at the company's El Segundo refinery outside of Los Angeles. According to the *California Globe*, the deal was proposed by Chevron and accepted by USW Local 675 on the same day, meaning that the roughly 1,000 workers at the southern California refinery had little to no time to review the contract.

The El Segundo and Richmond facilities combined supply 20 percent of the gas and aviation fuel used throughout California, the largest state in the country. Chevron has been attempting to keep the Richmond refinery in operation by using managers as scabs, posing immense dangers for the surrounding community.

The USW's moves to keep the strike isolated mirrors the strategy the employed during the 10-month lockout of workers at ExxonMobil's Beaumont, Texas refinery and processing plant. The USW isolated the strike, ignoring calls by rank-and-file workers throughout the industry for a solidarity strike and then agreed to a contract, which gutted seniority and job-picking rights and quadrupled the "probationary" period for new workers from 6 to 24 months.

Strikers at Richmond need to draw the necessary conclusions from the isolation of workers at Beaumont, that any successful struggle against these multinational oil companies requires a united struggle among workers at other refineries and beyond. Already the strike has intersected with emerging struggles among transportation workers and docker workers, as well as teachers within the Bay Area.

Another local truck driver from the South Bay told the WSWS that the gas industry in the Bay Area is largely dependent on shipping from BNSF, the Warren Buffett-owned railroad. Earlier this year, the company imposed a punitive attendance policy on its 17,000 workers, the so-called Hi-Viz system, which cuts the number of days off for sickness, fatigue or personal issues from 84 a year down to 22.

A federal judge in Texas blocked a strike by BNSF workers citing the need to keep critical supply lines going. Multiple unions at BNSF announced they would not challenge an anti-democratic injunction imposed by a federal judge, which effectively makes the workers' planned strike illegal.

A similar issue related to shipping has emerged with the contract for over 22,000 dockworkers set to expire on June 30. A strike by longshoremen would impact 29

ports throughout the West Coast of the US, including the critical ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles through which close to three-fourths of goods from Asia to the US pass.

The Richmond strike is also located a short distance from Sacramento, where roughly 5,000 teachers and staff have been on strike since March 23. Notably, many teachers have raised similar concerns to the oil workers over poor pay and attacks on their healthcare. Teachers have also expressed that workplace safety is a major issue for them given the continued spread of COVID-19 within the schools.

To break the isolation of the Richmond strike, the WSWS encourages workers to join the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OWRFC) to establish direct lines of communication and coordinated action with workers throughout the industry and beyond. The OWRFC is part of a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-company trade unions and Democrats and Republicans, and fighting to unite workers in opposition to the austerity contracts imposed by the USW and management.

To join or to get more information, email [oilworkersrfc@gmail.com](mailto:oilworkersrfc@gmail.com).



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