

UK: ExxonMobil oil refinery workers in Southampton set to strike after two-year 2.5 percent pay offer

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Around 100 workers employed by sub-contractors at the Fawley oil refinery in Southampton owned by US oil giant ExxonMobil will strike Friday after rejecting an insulting 2.5 percent two year pay offer. Further one day stoppages have been announced for April 25 and May 6.

Members of the Unite union voted for strike action in late February as inflation reached 7.8 percent, which has now climbed to 8.2 percent.

The ExxonMobil facility on the south coast of England is the largest oil refinery in the UK, supplying a sixth of all petrol stations across the country and all airports.

The action involves workers employed by Trant Engineering Limited, Veolia Services and Altrad Services. The sub-contractors fulfil key roles. According to Unite those employed by Veolia are engaged in removal of sewage and hydrocarbons and perform emergency work. Despite their integral role, the outsourced workers are employed on inferior terms and do not receive sick pay unlike those directly employed by Exxon.

Unite claims it will end this disparity, after allowing this situation to persist into the third year of the pandemic and leaving workers without any financial support if they became ill or needed to isolate. Unite's press releases confirm that Exxon's subcontractors were given a green light by the union to alter shift patterns that led to a further loss of pay.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, "The workforce did all that was asked of them by Exxon during the pandemic, changing shifts and losing out on vital overtime payments."

Such intolerable conditions were not entered into

voluntarily, but were enforced by Unite which ensured that the profit interests of the companies were placed before the protection of workers lives and onerous work schedules imposed that further reduced take home pay.

The overarching concern for Unite is that the anger over this backlog of grievances and the insulting pay offer does not undermine their continued co-operation with Exxon's subcontractors.

Graham described Exxon as "filthy rich", having made "vast sums from high energy prices, including £6.25 billion in 2021 alone". Despite this, Exxon is colluding with the employers to reduce workers' pay, she added. This is yet more of the empty posturing Unite's leader specialises in. Unite does not even formulate a pay demand and promises to prevent strike action if the workers are given a "respectful offer... so we can focus on the planned redevelopment of the Fawley site..."

A pay increase and parity of terms will not be won based on such entreaties to employers, which are solely directed at blocking a mobilisation of workers to fight for their interests and against the obscene levels of wealth extracted at their expense.

Graham has been tasked with forestalling a major strike wave among the 1.3 million members of Unite across key sections of the UK economy, with numerous strike mandates cancelled on the basis of slightly upwardly revised pay offers. This policing operation has involved false accounting of the settlements, claiming that workers achieved their demands and sparing the corporations a unified fightback.

Last November, Unite averted strike action by 400 workers based on a sell-out agreement at Stanlow oil refinery, owned by Essar Oil UK in Ellesmere Port,

north west England—the second largest in the UK. In September workers had returned a 98 percent mandate for strike action. This was provoked by a litany of abuses of terms and pay, including the company renegeing on a signed pay agreement for 2019, the refusal to pay bonuses for three years, and the ending of the final salary pension scheme.

Graham stated, “This was a highly complicated dispute and it is good news that members of Unite have felt able to accept the vastly improved offer.”

Other than the agreement to back pay bonuses, the deal was a travesty. It involved a below inflation pay deal of 1.5 percent for 2021 and a pay agreement for 2022 of 6.2 percent which is already a de facto pay cut.

Unite added cryptically, “A satisfactory outcome on the pensions issue was also agreed.” Local media cited a company spokesperson confirming that the Defined Salary Pension Scheme was closed and “new company representative boards” created. “We welcome the agreement and acknowledge the constructive approach Unite has taken throughout discussions. This agreement is a key step in the planned evolution of our Stanlow Refinery, helping reduce the business’s future liabilities and ensuring we are well placed to attract the investment necessary to deliver our low carbon transformation plans.”

The Mumbai based transnational, owned by billionaire brothers Shashi and Ravi Ruia was given everything it wanted by Unite. This followed its negotiations with the government over an extension on its repayment of £223 million outstanding tax as part of VAT sales tax deferral scheme during the pandemic in 2020. By last month the debt had still not been settled, with Essar Oil (UK) owing £109 million to HM Revenue and Customs.

Unite’s only concern is to deepen its collaboration with the energy giants and billionaires reaping vast profits from the industry.

Workers perform a critical role in the oil refinery sector. Given the fact that some of the most economically important facilities in the country are generally staffed by a few hundred workers, they have enormous collective social power. Without these workers the UK economy would ground to a halt in days.

Unite has done nothing to mobilise its membership in the industry in collective action against the offensive of

the employers. This is despite it boasting of the chemicals, pharmaceuticals, process and textiles industries, “Unite’s membership in the industries extends across production, engineering and maintenance, supervisory, scientific research, administration, marketing and sales, and management grades. Over 60,000 members work across the main chemicals and pharmaceutical companies, both large and small. Membership also includes workers in oil refineries, on offshore oil platforms, chemical production, life sciences, the production of glass, rubber, ceramic products and the textiles industry.”

In every dispute for higher wages and decent conditions, workers are in conflict not just with the employers but with their corporatist partners in the trade union bureaucracy. The way forward is for workers to organise themselves in organisations that they can control and democratically operate, rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union. The contractors at Trant Engineering Limited, Veolia Services and Altrad Services make up around a third of the contractors employed at the Fawley refinery. A rank-and file committee would enable them to reach out to other contractors and those directly employed by Exxon and with workers at Britain’s other six oil refineries, in order to mount a joint offensive.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party will assist workers in forming new organisations of struggle. We urge Fawley workers to **contact us** to discuss the fight ahead.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact