

Chevron refinery strike enters fourth week as union and company signal agreement to end strike

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On Monday, the Richmond, California, Chevron refinery strike will enter its fourth week. More than 500 refinery workers have been on strike since March 21, seeking an end to Chevron's brutal "standby" policy, unsafe working conditions, overwork, and a raise that does not cover the surging cost of living. Like workers across the country, workers in Richmond confront rapidly growing costs of gas, food, rent and other basic needs.

The strike takes place as protests are taking place worldwide against the soaring cost of living. These protests have taken place in countries as far afield as Spain, Peru, Sudan, Iraq and Sri Lanka, where protesters demanding affordable living standards have forced the resignation of the entire presidential cabinet.

The United Steelworkers (USW) has kept the strike by over 500 workers in Richmond, California, under wraps, with USW workers across the country and world barely knowing anything about the struggle of their brothers and sisters. At Richmond, workers reported that there has been no strike pay yet, even though the union bureaucrats have been receiving 100 percent of their pay and even as the union has over \$1 billion in assets accumulated through workers' dues!

On Friday, the financial press reported that the USW and Chevron would meet Monday "to discuss a possible end to a strike," according to Reuters. Chevron's spokesperson told the press, "We look forward" to the meeting.

Workers should be warned. Chevron is looking forward to ending this strike on its terms, and the USW is trying to help them. The fundamental issues of unsafe, overworked conditions and pay not adjusted for the surging cost of living will not be addressed.

The fundamental issues that workers are striking over cannot be won as long as the union is able to isolate the strike. This week, refinery workers from other parts of the country who have formed the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee issued a statement calling on all refinery workers to build for a national strike and tear up the rotten national contract.

It is urgent that workers organize themselves to ensure that no return to work is carried out before they have had a full week to study the text of any contract that is tentatively agreed to by the USW. Workers have a right to read the contract, discuss it democratically, make their own decisions and monitor ballot counting to prevent fraud.

The WSWS spoke to striking workers at Chevron earlier this week on the picket line. "Fred," whose name has been changed to protect his identity, said he noticed a significant deterioration in working conditions three years ago at the plant.

"The units have become unsafe," he said. He explained that Chevron was not performing adequate preventive maintenance on infrastructure. Equipment is not being repaired and leaks are common, posing a health risk to workers and residents. Even shrill steam leaks are not repaired in a timely manner, exposing workers to multiple risks (scalding, tinnitus and inability to communicate effectively).

The net result, Fred said, was that the company "can't retain employees, who are overworked, understaffed and underpaid. Instead of making the positions more attractive, they punish us by overwork, fatigue."

Another hated part of Chevron is the *stand-by* and *force-out* system. Because the company does not hire

enough employees, it puts employees on a stand-by system, where 18 shifts every 28-day cycle are considered “stand-by.” During those shifts five to 10 employees are on standby and cannot travel and live a normal life with family commitments. Fred explained that with stand-by, “you can be punished for not showing up when called out.”

He noted that oil workers had sacrificed during the pandemic only to support Chevron’s wealthy executives. He explained they were “forced to show up as ‘essential workers’ without any hazard pay.” Meanwhile Chevron management worked from home “playing with their kitties.”

“All their bonuses are based on our work. Thanks to the workers during the pandemic Chevron swung back to profit. They made 75 percent bonuses off the backs of workers.” Fred explained workers were able to run the plant for “two years and not a manager in sight!”

Now, managers are now slowly starting to return. “No pat on the back for the last two years—just ‘you need to optimize, do this, do that’.”

The efforts to shut down the strike come as the Richmond work stoppage has driven up the cost of jet fuel and diesel, significantly impacting production and shipping across the West Coast. Attempts to end the strike also come as oil workers at ExxonMobil’s Fawley refinery in Southampton, England, have initiated a strike for the same reasons as workers in Richmond: an insulting 2.5 pay increase from the company.

The courageous strike in Richmond was a blow to the attempt by the union and the oil companies to nationally impose a four-year agreement on 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers.

In March, the United Steel Workers tried to push its oil refinery and petrochemical workers into the agreement under the direction from the Biden administration. The agreement included a first year raise of only 2.5 percent and an annual average raise of 3 percent. This will result in a substantial loss of income for these workers, given that inflation is at a 40-year high of 7.9 percent per year.

Biden met with the president of USW, following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, in order to ensure that the union prevented any form of strike from taking place and that no disruption to oil supplies occurred.

While most locals have now voted to accept the

contract, workers across the country were dragged and intimidated into doing so.

For example, at the Phillips 66 refinery in Billings, Montana, the USW ordered a revote on the contract after workers defeated it in the first vote. Jeff, a worker there, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the USW then used a meeting to intimidate the membership into voting “yes.”

“We had a meeting where the national representative essentially told us to vote to ratify both contracts [local and national], ... it was heavily implied that without voting to ratify the contract it would be considered an economic strike, and the company would be free to terminate all the union members and hire who they wanted back without a union or binding contract,” he said. The agreement narrowly passed the second time.

The Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OWRFC) calls on workers to take urgent steps to set up methods for communicating amongst themselves to ensure that no return to work takes place until workers have had the full contract and ample time to read it.

To discuss the next steps with the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email oilworkersrffc@gmail.com.



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