Oil refinery workers in Southampton, UK mount one day strike at ExxonMobil

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The largest oil refinery in the UK at Fawley, Southampton, owned by US oil giant ExxonMobil, was hit by a one-day strike last Friday by around 100 workers. The Unite union members are directly employed by three sub-contractors, Trant Engineering Ltd, Veolia Services and Alstrad Services.

The companies tabled an insulting 2.5 percent pay offer for two years, with inflation now standing at 8.2 percent, the highest in four decades. Further one-day stoppages have been announced for April 25 and May 6.

The workers perform critical work at the refinery. They are also demanding occupational sick pay in line with those directly employed by ExxonMobil. The fact that action is required to enforce parity on such a basic health provision reflects the total disregard for workers' lives as the pandemic enters its third year. The workers for the sub-contractors have been forced to use holiday entitlements or claim the state statutory sick pay of just £96 per week.

The Southampton oil refinery is the largest of six in the UK. It processes around 270,000 barrels a day, supplying one sixth of diesel and petrol to garage forecourts around the country and 20 percent of all airline fuel used in the UK.

As with the strike action recently by bus drivers at Arriva London South and at Barts Trust and Great Ormond Street hospitals by outsourced National Health Service workers, there was a large turnout on the Fawley refinery picket line. Dozens assembled at the approach road to the refinery, stopping cars and speaking to tanker drivers about the reason for their action and urging support.

The strikers made homemade banners and placards rather than rely on the official ones provided by Unite. One banner read, "£17 Billion Exxon 21 Profits – Pay Offer 2.5% - CPI 6.2% RPI 8.2% - Shameful." Another stated, "United we stand divided we beg."

Painters and scaffolders at the oil refinery, who are not part of the dispute, refused to cross the picket line and joined the protest, demonstrating the basis for a wider fightback.

Unite Regional Officer Malcolm Bonnett acknowledged the solidarity shown by painters and scaffolders when speaking to the picket, but put forward no proposal to extend the action to other sub-contractors and broaden the fight. While he spoke of levelling up conditions and denounced the 2.5 percent offer in an interview with *That's TV Solent* he said that "part of the pay claim obviously is trying to get a pay deal nearer to inflation." In other words Unite is already preparing to sell the struggle short.

The union has said that the striking workers represent a third of all contractors at the refinery, but ExxonMobil informed the local media that the company employs around 1,000 to 1,300. According to figures published by the company in early 2020, the Southampton facility directly employed 1,460 and at times employed up to 2,000 contractors. Its total UK workforce is 2,500, showing the degree to which outsourcing on inferior terms of employment is practised by ExxonMobil.

The planned strike last Friday was widely trailed by the media due to the potential for the stoppages halting operations at a refinery integral to the UK economy. However, on the day of the strike there was virtually no coverage—expressing nervousness over industrial action by workers as price gouging by the oil corporations leads to a further round of hikes in the fuels costs and energy bills that are provoking social anger over the rising cost of living.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has declared

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that ExxonMobil is “Filthy Rich” and has no business tabling 2.5 percent at Fawley. This is hollow talk, as Unite has allowed the company and its sub-contractors to prioritise profits throughout the pandemic. In addition to the denial of sick pay this involved the imposition of new shift patterns which reduced workers overtime payments.

Graham commands an apparatus dedicated to the suppression of strikes. This was demonstrated last December at the second-largest oil refinery in the UK at Stanlow in north-west England, operated by Essar Oil UK. Strike action by 400 workers was cancelled to pave the way for a settlement based on a below-inflation pay deal and rubber-stamping the closure of the final salary pension scheme.

In the fight against pay restraint workers are not engaged in a struggle simply against individual companies. In February the governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Bailey, declared that workers would have to forego pay increases in line with the cost of living. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has stated that people struggling to make ends meet would have to decide between eating or heating. Asked this question last Wednesday by a *SkyNews* reporter he stated, “People obviously are going to face choices that they are going to have to make.”

Johnson can make such pronouncements on behalf of the corporate and financial oligarchy based on the de facto support he enjoys from the Labour Party and trade unions. They have lined up squarely behind the government and the US NATO proxy war in the Ukraine against Russia. This demands the closing down of all opposition to an unending pandemic and social inequality, further intensified by the disruption to the supply of energy and food passed onto workers through soaring inflation.

In the US, the Biden administration, in collaboration with the United Steelworkers of America (USW), rammed through in March a national bargaining agreement based on a four-year below-inflation pay deal, against 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers. This involves a 2.5 percent pay increase for the first year, with current inflation standing at 7.5 percent, with 3 percent increases for the years following—a drastic pay cut over the life of the contract. It also allows the oil giants to ramp up production in line the war effort against Russia, declaring open season on workers’ terms and conditions to further assist war profiteering.

The USW kept workers on the job at the 200 units for three weeks after the existing national agreement expired on February 1, ignoring the authorisation vote for strike action.

The sellout agreement came about following behind-the-scenes talks between USW President Tom Conway, Biden and the administration’s Defence and Energy secretaries on February 22. The USW then rushed through a snap vote based on releasing only “highlights” of the agreement and threatening workers voting down the deal that the companies would tear up local agreements. The union made it clear that any strike action in opposition would not receive official backing and workers would be left isolated, as in the case of the 600 workers at an ExxonMobil refinery and processing plant in Beaumont, Texas, who were locked out for 10 months.

The sabotage of the fight of oil workers is meeting resistance as demonstrated by the strike now in its fourth week by 500 workers at the Chevron refinery in California. The *World Socialist Web Site* has assisted workers with the formation in February of the Oil Workers Rank and File Committee (OWRFC), which has drawn up key demands including for a genuine pay increase, the restoration of the eight-hour day and for contract workers to be made full-time on the same pay and benefits. The OWRFC is appealing for genuine solidarity with the strike at Chevron and for this to become the basis for national strike action.

Oil refinery workers at Fawley and around the UK should follow this example and establish organisations that they can control and democratically operate—rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union. This would enable Trant, Veolia and Altrad workers at Southampton to reach out to the other subcontractors and those directly employed by ExxonMobil and with workers at Britain’s other six oil refineries, to mount a joint offensive as part of an international struggle.

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