

Chevron resists workers' wage demands as California refinery strike enters fifth week

Gabriel Black
19 April 2022

Are you an oil worker? Contact us to discuss mobilizing workers across the industry to back the Chevron strike.

The nearly one-month strike by over 500 workers at Chevron's oil refinery in Richmond, California is continuing with the company adamantly resisting workers' demands for bigger raises to defray the impact of surging living expenses.

The strike began on March 21 after rank-and-file workers rejected a second contract proposal brought back by the United Steelworkers, which was based on the concessionary four-year contract the USW imposed on 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers nationally. That deal included an average 3 percent raise, with 2.5 percent in the first year. With inflation running at a four-decade high of 8.5 percent nationally, and Bay Area residents set to spend an estimated \$4,400 more this year to cover living costs, the USW deal would mean a substantial cut in real wages for Chevron workers.

On Monday, Reuters reported that the USW Local 5 bargaining team had rejected an offer from Chevron submitted on April 11. BK White, the first vice president of Local 5, told Reuters that both the company and the union had exchanged proposals, which were rejected, and no further meetings were planned this week. The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted USW Local 5 for further information but did not receive a response.

It is apparent that Chevron is digging in for a long fight and is counting on the USW to isolate the struggle and starve workers into submission. For its part, the USW knows it would face another rejection if it immediately brought back another proposal with the same insulting raises. This is why rank-and-file workers must expand the strike, first to Chevron's

operations throughout California, Texas, Louisiana and other states, and then across the oil industry.

The Richmond facility refines about 250,000 barrels of oil a day. This is about 1.25 percent of the daily production of the United States and about 14 percent of California's daily consumption.

The sophisticated, multibillion-dollar facility of crude oil distillation and cracking requires skilled, experienced labor to operate safely. A fundamental issue of the strike is the unsafe, understaffed conditions Chevron imposes on workers. Refusing to hire enough full-time workers to safely operate the facility, the company forces workers to be on standby for weeks at a time, making family life impossible for many workers.

Now Chevron is manning the facility with unskilled managers and replacement workers, creating conditions for accidents and an environmental disaster.

A post on Facebook by Claudia Jimenez, a resident of Richmond, complains, "Since Chevron workers have been on strike, there have been flaring and leaks... Chevron would rather continue to operate the Richmond Refinery in an unsafe manner than award a fair contract." Jimenez posted several photos showing five separate flaring incidents and a spill of 500 pounds of sulfur dioxide vapor into the air by Chevron at the facility, reported on April 6.

Sulfur dioxide is "very toxic" and "can cause death," according to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. Approximately 110,000 people live in Richmond, California—a dense, impoverished urban area, stuck next to multiple refineries.

Chevron is purportedly paying scabs to come in from all over the country—with pay at \$70 an hour, double what the average striking worker makes, according to Local 5.

On the oil and gas worker section of the social media platform Reddit, a worker reported getting a job offer to work at Chevron during the strike. Dozens of oil workers discussed the strike, urging workers not to cross the picket line. The poster reported being offered \$70 an hour plus “\$145 a day per diem for 4-5 months for temporary operators.”

“Temporary operators aka a warm body,” wrote an oil worker from the Gulf Coast. Another worker explained, “After our 6-month strike our control room was trashed by the scabs working our jobs among other things. The company will treat you like royalty and once the strikes over dump you faster than a bag of crap to the curb.”

A third worker wrote: “At the end of the day, know that these men and women walked out of their comfortable job because they know their worth. They’re fighting for a fair wage and benefits not only for them, but for the generations that will come after them. What they’re doing is truly selfless, and they only want to ensure the people that come after them have it the same or better. Don’t help ruin that.”

Oil workers at Chevron must be warned: Chevron is preparing a long battle. From the beginning of the strike, management has bitterly complained that it had a deal with the USW and the Richmond local refused to buy it. Now this gigantic, multibillion-dollar company is adamant that it will not grant workers a penny more than the sweetheart deal it engineered with the USW nationally.

Oil workers across the country were disgusted with the paltry national contract, hurriedly rushed to be voted on after USW President Tom Conway met with President Biden out of the administration’s deep fear of a national oil strike. At several refineries—such as in Billings, Montana—workers voted the contract down, only to have USW national representatives flown out to browbeat workers in “informational meetings” to vote on it again.

A major factor in this struggle is the Biden administration’s determination to block a wave of strikes against surging prices, which would undermine his demands for “national sacrifice” as the US ramps up for an all-out war against Russia. In the coming weeks, hundreds of thousands of workers, including 23,000 West Coast dockworkers, have contracts expiring and are determined to win substantial

improvements in wages and working conditions.

The struggle of Richmond refinery workers cannot remain isolated. The Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which was established by workers to oppose the USW sellout agreement, is fighting for a national strike to back the Chevron workers.

If the Richmond workers prevail, this would encourage workers at Marathon, BP, ConocoPhillips and other companies to demand the reopening of the illegitimate national contract. This is precisely what the oil companies and the USW want to avoid.

That is why it is essential to expand the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee and mobilize the full strength of the working class behind the Chevron workers.

To join the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email oilworkersrffc@gmail.com.



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