UK: Striking Fawley oil refinery workers speak out against poor conditions and low pay

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Around 100 workers at the Fawley oil refinery in Southampton, England, staged their second one-day stoppage on Monday with a further 24-hour strike scheduled for May 6.

The Unite members are employed by sub-contractors to ExxonMobil which owns the refinery, the largest in the UK, supplying a sixth of all petrol to garage forecourts and a fifth of all airline fuel used nationally.

Refinery workers rejected an insulting 2.5 percent pay offer from Trant Engineering Ltd, Veolia Services and Altrad Services. Defined as key workers during the pandemic—in recognition of their critical role—the subcontracted employees have been denied occupational sick pay in contrast to those employed directly by ExxonMobil.

Monday's picket saw another large turnout. Around 80 picketers assembled at the roundabout near the refinery gates, supported by locals and other workers who refused to cross in solidarity.

ExxonMobil posted a fourth-quarter profit of $8.87 billion (£6.3 billion) in February, with earnings above pre-pandemic levels. According to Reuters, "Oil and gas production, Exxon's largest business, posted a $6.1 billion operating profit, the highest in two years. Earnings benefited from an 80% increase in oil prices and doubling of natural gas prices compared to 2020."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with striking refinery workers who explained the background to their dispute and its wider significance. Their identities have been concealed to protect against victimisation.

Picketer #1 said, "We changed our work shift to a four-day-on, four-day-off, 12 hours [pattern], so we lost overtime pay. They were meant to give us a pay rise, but they refused to give us anything. We are supposed to get a pay rise every two years, so we went to them for things like the sick pay and they refused everything.

"There were no thanks or anything for working through the pandemic. We had quite a few colleagues go down with COVID because we were working too many hours. We were doing four-on, four-off, and overexerting ourselves. People were getting ill the whole time, but rather than shutting down the refinery they kept it going, even though they were stockpiling oils and fuels in ships because they had too much of it. They didn't need to be open the whole time—they kept it open for money. Simple as that.

"Unite has got behind what we are doing here, but that's probably because the minimum they've offered is 2.5 percent and after inflation that doesn't keep up. If they offer 5 percent, we might be happy with it, but that's because what they've [already] offered is so low. I believe 100 percent there should be a united strike with workers across the country. Because you can't just represent one group and say, you've only had 2 percent or 5 percent, and another group gets the same and say we won't do anything about it. It should be country wide.

"Unite have only balloted here because it's the biggest one and they'll get the most attention. It's a bit of a publicity stunt, isn't it? The problem is the companies always reap the benefit of the people working for them. They pay minimum wage, or not minimum wage in our circumstances, but less than they should pay, whilst they reap the benefits. It is sad, but that is the reality of working for a company who make billions a year."

Picketer #2 said, "We're here because we need a pay rise and they've offered us a rubbish one and we want sick pay as well.

"For two years we were told that we had to keep the place open. We all had to change our shifts to four-days-on, four-days-off, coming in on the weekends. There

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was no slack time offered either. We did them a favour really. They didn't want to send us home on furlough, they said, 'Oh, we need your help', so we helped them out. Now they just offered us this pathetic pay rise.

"With the sick pay as well, all the managers are off and they all get sick pay, especially with COVID. When any of us get COVID, they only give you £90 a week. But when the managers are in on the act, they're on full sick pay."

Picketer #3 said, "Before, we would just talk without doing anything like this. But now it is time to start fighting for our rights because we run this place really. It's thanks to us, and yet they don't want to give us anything and treat us like we're nothing. I think we've done a very good job and hopefully we're going to raise the pay until we get what we want."

These sentiments express a broader mood of defiance among workers and their determination to overcome the inequalities which have fuelled corporate profits. The pandemic has been a game changer, with key workers recognising their enormous social power—refinery workers literally power the entire country, along with their fellow oil and gas workers globally.

It is precisely for this reason that the strike action at Fawley has been met by a near complete media blackout. Unite has devoted negligible coverage to the dispute. It has not produced a press release since March 29, prior to the start of strike action. It posted a token message on its national Twitter page on the latest one-day stoppage Monday.

Any escalation of the ExxonMobil dispute would draw in other oil refinery subcontractors whose workforces face similar substandard conditions. Veolia workers contracted by Essar Oil UK at the second largest oil refinery in the country at Stanlow, Ellesmere Port in the north-west of England, are being balloted separately by Unite for strike action over a 3.5 percent pay offer, despite inflation having surged to 6 percent CPI and 9 percent RPI. The Unite press release on the ballot at Stanlow makes no reference to the struggle of their co-workers at Fawley.

Fawley refinery workers should not accept the limitations imposed on their dispute by Unite, which is isolating the Fawley strikers to prepare the ground for a below-inflation pay deal. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham follows a well-worn script which starts with insincere declarations against "Filthy Rich" employers and ends with justifications of a sellout agreement. Last year at Stanlow oil refinery, Unite cancelled a huge mandate for strike action by 400 workers, paving the way for a de facto pay cutting agreement that undermined the pension scheme.

As the WSWS explained "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 to workers at Britain's other six oil refineries, in order to mount a joint offensive."

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