

USW isolating strike by California Chevron workers over refinery staffing and safety

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It has been nearly two months since 500 Chevron refinery workers went on strike in Richmond, California. These workers are fighting, among other things, for higher wages and to end a hated standby labor policy which forces them to be on call, constantly scrambling their lives around to meet the company's needs.

Just like nurses who have been on strike throughout the country, Chevron workers are fighting against the deliberate understaffing of their refinery that leads to unsafe working conditions, grueling schedules and risks a major work safety incident. Such an industrial accident could have catastrophic consequences for workers and the densely populated city of Richmond.

A team of WSWS reporters recently visited the picket lines. Despite being on strike since March 20, workers told the WSWS that the United Steelworkers union is not providing them with any strike pay. A small hardship fund exists only for those who seek it out and go through a humiliating application process. No one we spoke to had received any such funds.

The absence of strike pay stands in stark contrast to the enormous assets controlled by the union. The USW holds \$1.5 billion in assets according to its latest US Department of Labor filing. Among those assets are \$1.1 billion in stocks and bonds, and, critically, \$168.8 million in cash on hand. The exact amount the USW holds in its strike fund—which is paid for by workers' dues—is not published.

The USW has also not given any meaningful updates to striking workers. Save for some impotent publicity stunts posted on its Instagram and Facebook page, the USW has been virtually silent on what it is doing with management behind closed doors.

No matter what the USW bureaucrats claim, Chevron workers are not alone in their struggle. The oil workers

are facing the same conditions and pressures as all refinery and petrochemical workers and millions of workers in the United States and across the world.

The issue of safety is paramount to the struggle at Richmond. For many workers, the major disaster of 2012 at the Chevron Oil Refinery in Richmond, when a fire broke out at the refinery's only crude distillation unit, is still very much fresh in their minds. Then, a diesel leak forced workers to evacuate the facility. An initial fire was put out, but the leak worsened before a shutdown was finally ordered. By then it was too late, a vapor cloud spread over hundreds of feet engulfing the workers nearby.

Workers could not see and had to crawl out on their hands and knees. Most workers escaped the cloud before it burst into flames. Three workers were injured and treated on site. The fire burned for hours as toxic smoke filled the Bay Area. Over the succeeding days, more than 15,000 people sought medical treatment for breathing problems and related symptoms.

An investigation by the US Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) found that the disaster was completely preventable, and that Chevron was fully aware of multiple problems with the unit. Management refused to carry out necessary maintenance and repairs and delayed a shutdown of production after the dangerous leak was discovered. In other words, the 2012 Chevron fire was a clear result of the company's negligent profiteering, aided and abetted by the USW and its bogus "labor-management health and safety committees."

Today, none of these issues have gone away. While Chevron is making near record profits this quarter, it refuses to give workers 1) a wage increase (instead workers are getting a wage cut when inflation is considered! 2) safe staffing levels that would allow

better work schedules, 3) adequate investments into updating and refurbishing the refinery complex to ensure worker and community safety.

While reaping the rewards from high prices, oil giants Chevron, Marathon, ExxonMobil and others have refused to rehire thousands of workers laid off during the pandemic. This has led to chronic and unsafe understaffing at refineries around the country.

Tom, a striking refinery worker, previously told the WSWS, “The company puts our lives in danger to save pennies. They don’t hire enough. Because of this, we are forced in a lot, and this causes fatigue. Your sleep suffers. Your family life suffers. And when you’re on standby, you can’t have a life.”

The company has stuffed the facility with an army of inexperienced scabs, who, working alongside the managers, have led the facility to multiple spills and flares since the strike began.

Like workers across the world, striking Chevron refinery workers are also in a fight against inflation. The fact that Chevron, on the one hand, is raking in massive profits from high revenues, and, on the other hand, denying its workers a wage to keep up with inflation, is lost on no one.

The way forward for striking Richmond workers is not to wait until the USW announces a concessionary deal with Chevron falsely packaged as a hard-fought compromise.

There are thousands of refinery and petrochemical workers around the country who opposed the national oil agreement which was stuffed down their throat at the behest of USW President Tom Conway and the Biden administration. The rejection by 350 Valero workers at the McKee refinery in Sunray, Texas, centered precisely around the same issues Richmond workers face—overstaffing and unfair, unsafe work schedules.

The USW has no intention of doing anything to mobilize the mass of oil workers who sympathize with the striking Richmond workers because to do so would open up the grievances and anger felt by all oil workers about the national sellout contract.

This is why oil workers need their own organization, independent of the USW, to coordinate between refineries, provide accurate information and consider, ultimately, a vote to reopen the illegitimate national oil contract in face of the near-record profits of the oil

companies and the dramatic rise in the cost of living.

The Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee is a democratic organization run by workers themselves. The committee seeks to unite workers across refineries in a combined fight against the oil companies. The rank and file can break the isolation of the Richmond refinery workers, demand full strike pay from the USW and form a counsel of oil workers to begin discussions across refineries to reopen the contract and prepare a national strike of oil workers.



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