

California Chevron oil workers' strike sabotaged by United Steelworkers in total sellout

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On Saturday night, the United Steelworkers (USW) Local 5 in Richmond, California, claimed that workers had ratified a tentative agreement (TA) with Chevron. The USW called for an immediate end to the two-month-long struggle by 500 refinery workers.

The USW actions are a warning to the working class all over the United States and the world: the trade unions are agents of management, and they aim to betray. The struggle at Richmond is a case in point: Workers in Richmond voted down a tentative agreement presented to them by the USW *twice* before going on strike two months ago. But now workers have been given a contract that is even *worse* than the one they rejected before.

For months workers have been on strike to avoid a cut in real wages (after inflation), to fight for an end to chronic understaffing and hated work schedules, to ensure safety at the dangerous plant and to combat rising costs in their health care plan. Chevron workers speak for all workers across the globe who are refusing to bear the cost of inflation expressed in the dramatic rise in the cost of food, fuel, rent and other necessities.

The deal put forward by the USW on Saturday is the same contract as the one the company offered before the strike, but the signing bonus has been *reduced* by \$1,000.

John, a striking worker, told the WSWS that the tentative agreement was a “slap in the face.” He said the union had snuck in several new clauses that “are essentially carte blanche for the company firing the workers.” Chevron will make workers return to work in a staggered manner, he said, over one-and-a-half months for each crew.

During this time the company will hold “return to site orientation” which sounds like captive audience meetings. This is to instill the zero-tolerance policy for harassment or discrimination against employees (mainly those who crossed).

The company has written that they have the ability to hire the strikebreakers at an Operator level of pay. This usually is a three-year training process but they want to treat the strikebreakers as equals.

Additionally the company has the right to assign non-represented employees to do bargaining unit work until the end of September.

Finally, the union is required to withdraw all Unfair Labor Practice Violations against Chevron during the time of the strike. As well as refrain from filing anything new regarding that time frame. The company will get away with all their malpractice, without recourse according to the agreement.

The TA is a decisive win for Chevron and an unqualified blow to the aspirations of these workers for better conditions.

The blame for this defeat lies squarely with the United Steelworkers union. The USW has exposed itself as an organization of scabs dedicated to isolating and sabotaging the real interests of rank-and-file workers.

First, it should be noted that the contract reportedly passed by only “a slim majority,” according to a claim USW Local 5 official B.K. White made to NPR local affiliate KQED. No faith should be placed, however, in this claim. At factories and workplaces across the country, the USW, United Auto Workers, Teamsters and other major unions have been accused of ballot stuffing in order to ram through concessionary contracts against workers.

The USW has called off the strike, declaring the contract ratified, but the USW has not even released the vote count. They are fearful that releasing the results would show that a “majority” of striking workers did *not* support the contract. By stopping the strike without releasing any totals the USW is trying to halt any potential discussion, criticism or protest about this betrayal.

According to eyewitness reports from workers who spoke to WSWS reporters, few workers showed up to vote. In reality, only a minority of the workforce actually voted to end the strike.

In its short, five-sentence-long notification to its membership ending the two-month strike, the USW fraudulently declared there was an “incredible turnout” and told workers they should

be proud “regardless of the outcome,” that is, even though it was a total sellout.

This anti-democratic vote proceeding is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the duplicitous role the USW has played in this struggle.

There are over 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers in the USW who are covered by the national oil bargaining agreement the union renegotiated earlier this year.

On February 22, USW President Tom Conway met with Biden in a closed-door meeting aimed at ensuring that no national oil strike would occur. The Biden administration was worried that amidst the soaring cost of living, the growing struggle of the working class and, critically, its own desire to commit to an escalation towards war against Russia, strikes by oil workers could explode into focal points of popular opposition to war, living costs and general social conditions.

Just three days later, Conway announced the USW had come to an agreement with the oil companies. Conway even bragged—to the political and financial press—that he had signed a “responsible contract” that would “not add to inflationary pressures.” In short, Conway was saying, “We’re not responsible for inflation because our contract is bad for the workers.”

Following the “agreement” between the USW, the Biden administration and the oil companies, the USW exerted pressure on locals throughout the country to accept the contract.

At many plants, for example, at the Billings, Montana, Philips 66 refinery, workers voted down the contract, only to have USW executives flown out to browbeat them into accepting it. As one worker at that plant told the WSWS, “I consider the national package a complete joke... These companies make billions, and inflation is hacking away at true income. A raise that’s anything less than what inflation [is] does not constitute a raise.”

At Chevron, workers voted down the deal presented to them by the USW twice.

Once they went on strike, the USW provided no strike pay. This has been a punishing two-month experience for workers with no paychecks. Meanwhile, the USW has over \$168 million in cash on hand.

During the strike, Chevron even announced it had quadrupled its quarterly profits from the year prior—a testament to how it was cashing in on the very inflation workers were fighting against.

Throughout all this the USW has completely isolated the striking workers. A refinery worker in Texas told the WSWS that basically no one even knew about the struggle, a refrain repeated online when a WSWS article went viral on Imgur with 100,000 views. The top comments were all USW members saying they had not heard about the Chevron struggle, with one worker noting how “fishy” that was.

John told the WSWS about the mood among workers at Richmond. “The consensus,” he said, “is that it’s a sellout. No

one cares for the agreement.”

Any genuine fight against the oil companies must strive to unite oil workers across the country in a combined effort to oppose the concessionary national pattern bargaining agreement and fight for a real improvement of working conditions. But to do this would require a struggle against the USW itself.

It is for this reason that we urge workers to get involved with the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

The struggle at Chevron, and the struggle in the oil and gas industry as a whole, is not over. Rather, it has just begun.

In just two weeks dockworkers across the West Coast may go on strike. In auto, trucking, health care and across the entire working class, the grievances experienced by Chevron workers are broadly felt. They want to fight declining real wages as work becomes harder and harder, with more and more punishing work schedules.

Various pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) do the dirty work for the pro-capitalist unions. Typical was the response of Richmond City Councilperson Claudia Jimenez, a DSA member, who praised the USW sellout. “I’m glad that the workers got a contract. However, it should not have taken workers striking to get the benefits they were asking for,” even though workers won none of their demands.

This experience shows that rank-and-file committees are needed to create a democratic organization run by workers themselves, independent of the trade unions and the Democratic Party, which seeks to unite different sections of struggling workers in a combined fight against the major corporations and their political lackeys.

To join the Oil Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email oilworkersrhc@gmail.com. The OWRFC promises to do everything to protect the privacy of those involved and ensure anonymity and security.



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