Unite ends strike action at largest oil refinery in UK run by ExxonMobil with a whimper

Tony Robson
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On June 7, the Unite union announced the end of the industrial dispute by 100 workers at Fawley oil refinery near Southampton—the largest in the UK—run by US oil giant ExxonMobil.

Even based on the limited details disclosed in the union press release, the terms of the agreement fall well short of the demands which prompted workers to take strike action from early April, including three 24-hour stoppages. The refinery workers—employed by three contractors for ExxonMobil, Trant Engineering Ltd, Veolia Services and Altrad Services—rejected an insulting 2.5 percent two-year pay offer and demanded occupational sick pay.

The settlement was agreed prior to a fresh round of one-day stoppages at the Fawley refinery, which supplies a sixth of the UK's petrol and diesel to garage forecourts and 20 percent of airline fuel used nationwide. The scheduled stoppages on June 9,10,16,17 and 20 would have escalated the industrial action. Unite provided no details on the vote to accept a revised offer.

According to Unite the agreed pay deal is for a 9.2 percent increase in hourly wages and premiums. While workers' determined refusal to accept 2.5 percent has resulted in a pay settlement beyond what the companies initially tried to foist on them, it is still below the RPI rate of inflation which has reached a 40-year high of 11.1 percent.

The union tries to get around this awkward truth by referring to the rate of inflation in April (9 percent) when workers began their action, as if the cost-of-living crisis has stood still rather than worsening ever since.

Unite has also ended the dispute without the core demand of workers for occupational sick pay being resolved. The union dedicated one line in passing to this issue, indicating it has been kicked into the long grass: "A new working group on sick pay has also been set up."

While classified as key workers during the pandemic because of the critical role they play in the maintenance and safe operation of the refinery, the contract workers continued to be subjected to inferior terms. Those employed directly by ExxonMobil receive sick pay from day one. Under conditions of a global pandemic now in its third year, contract workers are forced to rely on Statutory Sick Pay of around £96 a week.

Unite adopted far more cautious language than it has employed over other revised pay offers hailed as victories, describing the deal as securing a "pay lift." This did not stop General Secretary Sharon Graham from stating, "Congratulations to Unite's members at Fawley. The members stood strong during this dispute—their solidarity secured them this improved pay deal. Once again Unite's total commitment to improving jobs, pay and conditions has paid dividends for our members."

The corporate media and pseudo-left groups have parroted the claims made by Graham to have won a succession of pay victories since taking office last August. This false narrative is nowhere more exposed than in the energy sector, which has become a byword for rampant profiteering and in which Unite has demobilised fights by a key section of workers with the power to bring the economy to a standstill.

Graham's reference to workers' solidarity is particularly galling. Stoppages at Fawley oil refinery were limited and isolated. It was precisely when genuine solidarity threatened to develop beyond the token action prescribed by Unite that it moved to first suspend the dispute and then quickly jettison a scheduled escalation of the action after a pause of more than a month.

Unite's response to the victimisation of one of its own reps by Altrad Services in connection with 50 other workers at the refinery refusing to cross the picket line was to immediately suspend strike action at the end of April. This was in order to convene behind-closed-doors discussions with management. No further statements have been issued over whether the suspension of the Unite rep has been lifted.

The Fawley oil refinery dispute contains vital lessons because it exposes how the union bureaucracy responds to even the first signs of a broader fightback: not by being pressured into a fight but by working more closely with the employers to rein in and quash the potential for a wider struggle.

ExxonMobil posted a fourth-quarter profit of $8.87 billion (£6.3 billion) in February, boosted by the doubling of natural gas prices since 2020 and an 80 percent increase in oil prices. The sentiments of workers at Fawley refinery were informed by a sense of injustice over the contempt for their safety and welfare coupled with these obscene levels of wealth accumulated through their exploitation while denied a living wage.

As strikers informed the WSWS, "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."

However, the official strike action remained in the hands of the Unite apparatus which was dedicated to preventing the necessary expansion and escalation of the struggle in order to protect its corporatist relations with management.

The sellout deal at Fawley is of a piece with the role of Unite in shutting down the wildcat action which hit 16 offshore oil and gas platforms in the North Sea last month. Rig workers had demanded a "wage revolution" and stated that their action was directed not at one company but the "industry world-wide as a whole." Unite called on workers to end their unofficial action under threat of instant dismissal, citing the agreement of one of the major contractors affected to join a collective agreement, covering 5,000 workers, between rig operators and Unite, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and the GMB. The purpose of the agreement is to secure supply lines and the interests of investors.

Struggles by offshore energy and oil refinery workers demonstrate that a genuine fight for a cost-of-living pay increase and parity of terms can only proceed through a rebellion against Unite and all the unions. Graham's efforts to front a claimed revival of trade unionism is directed against a movement from below based driven by a developing sense of class unity, anti-capitalist sentiment and desire for a redistribution of wealth out of the grip of the corporate elite.

Unite disciplines workers not only to protect company profits from their pay demands, but to control opposition to oil and gas companies deeply implicated in British/US militarism and wars for control of energy resources.

Graham has played a prominent role in supporting the proxy war and sanctions by US-NATO powers against Russia and the military escalation of the Johnson government, waving the false flag of humanitarian concern. The war requires the unions to stand guard over the supply lines of Western energy companies who are gouging huge profits as a result of the economic dislocation caused and aiming to share in the spoils of oil and gas resources to be carved out of Russia.

Workers require genuine democratic organisations of struggle which break down all sectional and national divisions and unify their struggles globally against a common enemy. This is an especially stark necessity in the case of the oil and gas sector dominated by mega-rich transnational companies. A fight against social inequality and rampant exploitation is vitally connected to the struggle against war and an unending pandemic, none of which can be resolved on a national basis.

This is the perspective of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees which seeks to unify workers internationally. We urge oil and gas workers to make contact and discuss how this fight can be taken forward.