

Oil workers walk out at Marathon Detroit refinery

Our reporters
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More than 270 workers walked out on strike at the Marathon Detroit refinery Wednesday morning. They are demanding a new contract with substantial wage increases and an end to exhausting work schedules, which threaten the health and safety of workers and the surrounding working class community in southwest Detroit and the neighboring town of Melvindale.

According to Teamsters Local 283, the board and field operators, chemists, laboratory technicians, electricians and mechanics have been working without a contract since January 31. Rank-and-file workers voted by 95 percent to strike after the contract expired more than six months ago.

In a press release, local Teamsters officials said they called the strike because Marathon has not been willing to bargain fairly. It is clear, however, that workers forced the strike, angered over months of stalling, the bringing in of federal mediators and other efforts by both the company and the union to block a strike.

Striking workers are subjected to 12-hour shifts and have little time to physically recover or spend with their families. At the same time, Marathon made \$9.68 billion in 2023 profits, plus another \$6.7 billion in the first two quarters of 2024.

“We are essential workers that work around the clock to ensure the plant keeps running and keeps making Marathon money,” Jeff Tricoff, a 39-year-old relief operator is quoted as saying in a union press release. “Marathon has made record profits for the last few years by ramping up production and cutting costs, but we don’t want our contract to be a part of their cost-cutting efforts.

“Capitalism at its worst,” Tricoff told the *Detroit News*. “They care more about their shareholders. Every quarter they release their financials, and they’re offering billions of dollars in stock buybacks, and they’re only offering us pennies on the dollar.”

Marathon has spent \$5.2 billion on stock buybacks and dividends for its wealthy investors in the first two quarters of this year alone. Last week, the stockholders approved the \$22.5 billion takeover of the company by ConocoPhillips, which will form the US’s largest independent oil and gas producer when the deal closes by the end of the year.

The merger is one of a series of consolidations in the global energy industry, which will result in billions more for investors and brutal cost-cutting and deadly conditions for workers.

Annual wage increases accepted by the Teamsters in the last four-year contract of between 2.5 and 3 percent have not kept up with record levels of inflation. The union is reportedly proposing a 6 percent raise in its first year, followed by a 4 percent increase the second year and 3 percent increases in years three and four.

This would do little to compensate workers for the losses they have suffered due to years of high inflation rates. While the official inflation rate has fallen, consumer prices have increased 20.9 percent since February 2020—and even higher for some key necessities—a Bankrate analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows.

To add insult to injury, Marathon is also reportedly seeking to cut workers’ benefits.

The giant corporate and Wall Street firms, with the full backing of both the Democrats and Republicans, are waging a ruthless class war against workers, with the US Federal Reserve maintaining high interest rates to drive up unemployment to beat back the workers’ demands for wage increases that keep up with inflation.

Wave of layoffs

The ruthless job- and cost-cutting campaign in the oil and petrochemical industry is part of a wave of layoffs, including plans to eliminate the second shift at the Stellantis Warren Truck plant on October 8 and wipe out nearly 2,500 jobs. On Wednesday, LL Flooring announced it was closing its doors and putting 2,000 workers on the street.

This economic terror is having its intended effect. ZipRecruiter reports large declines in the starting pay offered to 20,000 different job positions offer this year, including a 55.9 percent fall in average wages for new hires in retail, a 24.5 percent decline in agriculture, and a 17.3 percent in manufacturing, according to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*.

At the same time, workers are striving to fight back. More than 10,000 workers at 25 hotels across the US went on strike Monday to demand higher pay, lower workloads and reduced hours, and tens of thousands more are determined to follow suit. This followed the walkout by 17,000 AT&T workers across nine states in the Southeast.

On the East Coast docks, 45,000 workers are determined to fight eroding wages and unsafe working schedules when their contract expires at the end of the month. Next week, on September 12, the contract for 33,000 Boeing workers in the states of Washington and Oregon expires.

Sellout bureaucrats

In every one of these struggles, workers have confronted not only ruthless employers and the corporate-controlled politicians but the collusion of the trade union apparatus. This was demonstrated most forcefully in the nearly one-month strike by 450 auto parts workers at Dakkota Integrated Systems in south Chicago. These workers rejected four sellout agreements backed by the United Auto Workers bureaucracy before union officials rammed through the deal on the fifth try last weekend.

In February 2022, the United Steelworkers bureaucracy blocked a strike by 33,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers, who were determined

to win inflation-busting wage increases and end the exhausting schedules, workloads and multi-tasking that endanger energy workers' lives.

Then-USW President Tom Conway reached a deal after holding a secret meeting with President Biden and other administration officials. The USW agreed not to call a strike, which could have quickly shut down two-thirds of the nation's refinery capacity, right at the point when the administration was trying to ramp up domestic energy production as it escalated NATO's confrontation with Russia. After backing Biden's war plans, Conway boasted that the deal did "not add to inflationary pressures."

In fact, the betrayal of oil workers only perpetuated the deadly conditions in the refineries and led directly to September 2022 explosion at the BP Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio, which killed two operators, Ben and Max Morrissey. An investigation into the disaster showed that the corporation had ignored many danger signs, defied workers' demands to shut operations as the catastrophe unfolded and had cut corners during its maintenance turnaround to get the refinery running as fast as possible to exploit rising prices.

The Teamsters bureaucracy has its own rotten record, from the betrayal of the UPS workers, which has led to thousands of job cuts, to working with the Biden administration to block the strike by 110,000 railroad workers and open the door for both corporate-controlled parties to outlaw the strike and impose a contract that workers had previously rejected.

If Marathon workers are not going to suffer the same fate, the rank and file must take the conduct of the struggle into its own hands. A rank-and-file strike committee should be formed to outline a series of non-negotiable demands, including substantial wage and benefit increases, the hiring of hundreds of new workers to end understaffing and allow for a sharp reduction in working hours with no loss of pay, a ban on multi-tasking and rank-and-file oversight of health and safety.

A dismal record

The last strike at the Melvindale refinery was in 1994-95, when workers waged a bitter months-long strike against overwork and dangerous conditions. At that time, workers were being compelled to work up to 60 consecutive days.

Workers also ridiculed management's claims that the facility had been "accident-free" for two years, noting that company supervisors forced injured workers to report, whether they could work or not. During the strike, Marathon brought in management personnel from other refineries in Illinois, Louisiana and Texas to operate the facility.

Once again, Marathon is bringing in strikebreakers from other Marathon refineries, including its Galveston Bay facility in Texas. In a press release, Marathon said it was implementing plans to "continue safely operating the facility with trained and qualified Marathon employees" and that it was committed to "care for the environment as we continue producing transportation fuels for the region..."

Workers debunked these claims noting that the facility was dangerous enough without being run by strikebreakers who were unfamiliar with the complexities of the 94-year-old refinery. In 2013, a tank of sour water, a mixture of hydrogen sulfide and ammonia generated from refining crude oil, exploded at the refinery during maintenance work. Although there were no injuries reported, a mandatory evacuation order was issued for 3,000 residents of Melvindale, due to concerns of deteriorating air quality caused by the resulting fire.

The zip code surrounding the giant refinery is the most polluted in the state, according to a study by the University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability. Residents in the 48217 zip code, where

dozens of other industrial facilities are located, have a life expectancy that is 10 years lower than in surrounding areas.

Marathon has a dismal safety record. This includes the May 15, 2023 death of Scott Higgins, a 55-year-old refinery worker, and the injury of two other workers at the Galveston Bay refinery in Texas City, Texas. In August 2023, there was a massive explosion and fire, resulting from a naphtha leak, at the Marathon Petroleum refinery between Reserve and Garyville, Louisiana.

A whole host of Democratic politicians went to the Melvindale picket lines on the first day of the strike, claiming to support the striking Marathon workers. This is a fraud. Harris and the Democrats, no less than Trump and the Republicans, are in the pockets on the giant energy conglomerates and supported the outlawing of the railroad strike.

In contrast, Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for US vice president, posted a statement on his X account, calling for the broadest support in the working class for the striking Marathon workers.

He wrote:

The strike by workers at the Marathon Detroit refinery is of critical importance for all workers. The strikers are fighting against a multi-billion-dollar conglomerate, which has repeatedly sacrificed workers' health and safety and livelihoods to corporate profit. Marathon is no different from BP, which was criminally responsible for the corporate murder of two young brothers, Ben and Max Morrissey, in September 2022.

The energy monopolies buy the presidency and Congress, and reap huge profits from America's endless wars, from the invasion of Iraq and the present slaughter in Gaza, to the escalating wars against Iran, Russia and China.

I urge all workers in the Detroit area, including the Stellantis Warren Truck workers who are fighting job cuts, to support the striking Marathon workers, oppose the strikebreaking operations, and break the isolation of this strike being imposed by the Teamsters and UAW officials. Build rank-and-file committees to issue your own non-negotiable demands. A line in the sand must be drawn in Detroit to defend the right of all workers to a secure, good-paying and safe job.

The workers produce all of society's wealth, and instead of that wealth being shoveled into the pockets of the wealthy shareholders, the Socialist Equality Party calls for the expropriation of the ill-gotten fortunes of the super-rich and the transformation of the energy industry into a publicly owned utility, democratically controlled and collectively owned by the working class, as part of the socialist transformation of economic and social life.



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