

# “We can’t keep fighting these battles alone”: Striking Marathon Detroit Refinery workers call for joint fight against job cuts and falling living standards

Jerry White  
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After more than 10 weeks on strike, 270 workers at the Marathon Detroit Refinery remain determined to win improved wages and defeat the giant oil company’s demands to contract out work, cut healthcare benefits and impose exhausting and dangerous work schedules.

The striking chemists, mechanics, electricians and other workers—members of Teamsters Local 283—walked out September 4, more than seven months after the expiration of their previous contract. Marathon, which made \$287 million third quarter profits in 2024, and more than \$17 billion over the last three years, has offered a 3 percent raise to workers who have not had a pay increase since the start of the pandemic.

Contract negotiations, overseen by a federal mediator, restarted last week and have reportedly continued this week. Workers on the picket line say they are digging in for as long as a six-month strike, like the walkout at Marathon’s refinery in St. Paul, Minnesota in 2021. The Detroit Police Department is escorting tanker trucks across the picket lines, and Marathon has brought in management personnel from other facilities to keep the 150,000-barrel-per-day Detroit refinery running.

“We’ve been out here fighting 24/7 since September 4,” a veteran worker told WSWWS reporters. “If we are separate and keep fighting each of these battles individually, people are going to lose confidence and give in to anything they offer us. It would be a lot better if we all came together.”

“It isn’t about Blue versus Red or Democrats versus Republicans. It’s about the rich versus the poor. People may not think they’re poor but with the price of food, mortgages and everything else going up, it is only a matter of time before everyone’s going to be starving. What we’re going through doesn’t have anything to do with immigrant

workers. It’s sheer greed that has put us in this situation. If they can have us at each other’s throats, that’s the whole point, instead of looking at them, the ones with the silver spoons in their mouths, we’ll be fighting each other. It’s divide and conquer.”

A younger worker added, “Marathon says its employees are family. You don’t keep your family out in the cold while you’re making all these profits. When I got a job here right after graduating from Michigan State, I was like a wide-eyed deer in the headlights. Some workers have families and homes, but the younger ones, a lot of us can’t afford a house. That’s just the reality. It’s tough man. You better win the lottery or you’re going to grind to afford anything in this economy. Especially at a company like this that doesn’t want to give you anything.”

With its \$23 billion buyout in 2018 of Andeavor (owner of ARCO-brand gas stations), Marathon became the largest petroleum refinery operator in the US, with 16 refineries and over 3 million barrels per day of refining capacity. Through the buyout, Marathon also sought to expand and eventually dominate the Mexican oil and gas markets.

Stocks of Marathon and other energy giants initially rocketed after Trump’s electoral victory. Since then, the stocks have stabilized on the realization that Trump’s plans to sharply increase domestic production, including drilling for oil and gas on federal lands, could lead to falling prices and lower stock values.

“While drillers, rig suppliers and related oil industry firms could see increased activity when Trump takes office, the increased production that Trump desires could boost crude supplies and drive oil prices lower, pressuring oil stocks,” stated *Investopedia* in a November 8 article which was subtitled, “Trump’s pro-energy stance may backfire for oil stocks.”

Oil refiners reaped record profits in 2021 and 2022 from the resurgence of travel and economic activity after collapsing in the first year of the pandemic. But profit margins dropped sharply as new refineries opened around the world and demand growth slowed, partly because of the shift away from fossil fuels, according to industry analysts. To boost profit margins, two US refineries are slated for closure next year— LyondellBasell Industries’ Houston refinery and Phillips 66’s Los Angeles refinery.

One way or another, the energy giants intend to make the working class pay through further job cuts and an intensification of the exploitation of remaining workers.

In 2011, Marathon Petroleum, the owner of the Detroit refinery, was spun off from the large Marathon Oil Corporation, a Houston-based corporation focused on “upstream” operations, i.e., exploration, drilling and production, rather than “downstream” refining and distribution.

Marathon Oil just notified the Texas Workforce Commission that it plans to lay off more than 500 workers at its Houston headquarters when its \$23 billion merger with ConocoPhillips is completed by the end of the year. This is part of a growing trend among oil giants in the Houston area, including Shell Global, which announced in September plans to cut its oil and gas exploration staff by 20 percent as part of \$2-3 billion in cost reduction by the end of 2025.

### **Break the isolation of the Marathon Refinery Strike!**

Conditions to broaden the struggle by Detroit Marathon workers are more than ripe, with opposition growing to the wave of job cutting by the automakers in Detroit, Toledo and other cities. For this to happen rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. A rank-and-file strike committee must be formed to oversee all negotiations and report back to the membership, and ensure that workers’ non-negotiable demands are not abandoned.

At the same time, the rank-and-file committee must establish lines of communications with the hundreds of thousands of autoworkers, construction workers, Teamsters truckers and delivery workers, railway workers, public school teachers and many other workers in the Detroit area to organize mass demonstrations and coordinated action. Marathon’s strikebreaking, including by construction unions like the Operating Engineers which are sending their members across the picket lines, must be halted.

At the same time, rank-and-file Marathon workers in Detroit must make direct appeals to Marathon and refinery

and petrochemical workers across the country for joint action to win the strike.

Far from organizing such a struggle, the Teamsters Local 283 officials have brought a host of Democratic Party politicians, including Bernie Sanders, to the picket lines for photo-ops with the workers. On November 9, Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson and Detroit City Council member Gabriela Santiago-Romero, along with United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain and other union leaders, were provided a platform at a union rally to proclaim their “support” for the working class.

The rally was only days after the electoral debacle suffered by the Democratic Party, whose indifference to the economic suffering of workers, fidelity to Wall Street, and relentless warmongering allowed the fascist Trump to win the elections and prepare a massive assault on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

The Democrats’ claim that they are for striking workers is belied by the deployment of scab-herding cops by Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, and the decision by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy to raise emission caps for the refinery and give Marathon the go-ahead to run at full capacity just days after the strike began. As for Fain and the UAW bureaucracy, they are deeply hated by rank-and-file autoworkers for selling out the 2023 contract battle with his bogus “stand up” strike and signing a contract that has paved the way for thousands of job cuts.

“These giant companies have lobbyists and buy off the politicians from both parties,” a veteran worker told the WSWS. “The government spends trillions on wars instead of what we need here.

“Without the working class you wouldn’t have any type of industry. Construction workers pave the roads, actors create the entertainment industry, and every day working-class people keep the food in the stores. Other than that, you either have the wealthy who don’t do anything and pay us very little to do the stuff, or you are the poor who don’t make any money. We’re supposed to be in the middle, but we’re going to slowly fall to the bottom, if we don’t stop this now.”

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