

# In move to break 3-month strike, Marathon ending medical coverage for Detroit refinery workers

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The working class in the metro Detroit area must come to the defense of the more than 250 Marathon refinery workers who have been on strike for three months to fight subcontracting and attacks on their wages and healthcare benefits. The \$85 billion energy company has imported out-of-state management personnel and contractors to keep its 150,000 barrel-a-day refinery running, with its strikebreaking operation protected by the Detroit Police Department.

Now, on December 13, Marathon plans to cut striking workers and their families off medical insurance. Management is essentially putting a gun to the heads of workers and demanding that they surrender or watch their spouses and children go without medicine and even life-saving treatments.

At the same time, Marathon has reportedly offered striking workers who abandon their fellow workers and cross the picket line up to \$500 in additional weekly pay for medical expenses.

If Marathon can smash this strike—in the heart of Detroit, just a few miles from the Ford Rouge Complex, two US Steel mills and other major unionized industrial facilities—it will only embolden other corporations to accelerate the attack on the jobs and living standards of autoworkers, trucking and logistics workers, healthcare, educators and other sections of the working class.

If the face of this frontal assault, the Teamsters, the United Auto Workers, the United Steelworkers and other unions, which have 1.2 million members in Michigan and nearby Ohio, are doing nothing. Officials from Teamsters Local 283 have told workers to pay for continued healthcare out of their own pockets. To qualify for this, under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA), workers would have to shell out almost \$300 every week or nearly one-third of what they are getting in

strike benefits from the Teamsters union.

“In two weeks, our insurance runs out,” a veteran refinery worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “There are workers whose children are diabetic and need insulin. All the union is saying is that we should get COBRA and pay for it with our strike pay.

“We have very good insurance, and this is a major issue in the strike. When the strike started, there were 270 of us. About 30 have either crossed the picket line or retired. They are hoping to get more of us to cross when they cut us off.”

A younger worker added, “People are scrambling to find some other insurance. I don’t see how COBRA is affordable for anyone. We’ve checked about getting state care but were told with strike pay we make too much.”

This blatant strikebreaking must be stopped by mobilizing the working class throughout the area in mass demonstrations and common strikes. But such a struggle will not be organized from above by Teamsters and UAW bureaucracies. It must be organized from below by rank-and-file workers themselves.

This means constructing a rank-and-file strike committee, made up of the most trusted militants, to establish direct lines of communication with autoworkers in Detroit and Toledo who are fighting jobs cuts and the treachery of the UAW bureaucracy, and other sections of workers. They should also fight for international solidarity with striking Canada Post workers across the Detroit River.

At the same time, a rank-and-file committee must prepare workers to oppose any efforts by the Teamsters bureaucracy to shut down the strike and ram through a pro-company contract.

Appealing to rank-and-file workers throughout the metro Detroit area for support, the young refinery worker stated, “They try to divide us based on industry. Even if you are part of another union, we are all in the same fight. We understand these corporations are hanging over us, and we’re all working people. That goes for autoworkers, UPS

drivers, people in the oil industry and elsewhere. It's important we stand together.

"I've never known what it was to be on strike until now. I can see how important it is to support workers in other industries and people in the communities outside the refinery. There are a lot of similarities between us. We have no job security anymore, our schedules are manipulated non-stop, and we are working more than 40 hours a week. There is no respect for sick time. They just use us as machines, as instruments, for their corporate profit."

The veteran worker also called on other workers to support the struggle. But the refinery operator said this had to be organized by the rank and file because the Teamsters bureaucracy was opposed to any such fight.

"In 2021, there was a six-month strike at Marathon's refinery in St. Paul, Minnesota. The company sent salaried personnel from the Detroit refinery to St. Paul to operate the refinery during the strike. Our Teamsters local didn't do anything for the St. Paul workers even though they were also Teamsters members. We could have supported them and stopped the company from sending our managers there.

"It's like the way the strike started. Our contract expired on January 31, but instead of calling the strike then, the union gave the company plenty of time to find contractors, and we didn't strike until September. A turnaround [planned shut down for maintenance and repairs] was scheduled in the fall, and workers ended up training the contractors who have taken our jobs. It was like the Teamsters said, 'Let's train them and make this strike as painless for the company as possible.'

"Now, instead of appealing to the workers who might cross the picket line, Local 283 officials sent out a letter saying they were going to sue anybody who went back to work. That's not talking to us, that's just bullying us, and workers didn't like it.

"We could also be getting support from the surrounding communities. The 48217 zip code that surrounds the refinery is the most polluted in the state, if not the country. Everyone wants clean air, but the union officials are on the side of the company, instead of leveraging the support we can get to fight Marathon."

Union officials had brought out a host of politicians to the picket lines, from Bernie Sanders to members of the Detroit City Council, along with UAW President Shawn Fain. They all claimed to support the striking workers even though Biden and the Democrats outlawed the 2022 railroad strike, and Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan has dispatched cops to escort scabs through the picket lines.

"They're parading all these Democrats on our picket lines, but this is only to check all the boxes and make it look like [Local 283 President Steve] Hicks is doing something to win

the strike. Instead of fighting the company, the Teamsters act like middlemen. All they're concerned about is their dues money. They keep us divided instead of helping each other."

The Teamsters bureaucracy has more than enough assets to fund workers' healthcare benefits and the rank and file should demand this.

According to the union's latest LM-2 filing with the US Department of Labor, the Teamsters controlled \$566,211,111 in assets in 2023. This money, paid for by the dues of 1.2 million members, belongs to the rank and file, not the union apparatus.

But instead of providing the resources Marathon workers need for a sustained fight, the union paid out \$52 million in salaries and disbursements to the staff of the Teamsters national headquarters in Washington D.C., including \$419,222 to General President Sean O'Brien and \$377,537 to General Secretary-Treasurer Fred Zuckerman.

In 2023, the Teamsters only paid out \$8,232,916 in strike pay. This was even less than the \$8,448,891 the bureaucracy spend on "political activity and lobbying," i.e., trying to buy the support of the big business politicians in the Democrats and Republicans. This includes O'Brien's cozying up to President-elect Donald Trump, who is constructing a cabinet of billionaires and fascists who are preparing to wage a war against the working class.

The outcome of the Marathon strike depends on the initiative taken by rank-and-file refinery workers and workers throughout the metro Detroit area. This struggle can be won but only if the isolation of the fight is broken and workers throughout the area come to the defense of these defiant workers.

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