

Contract for 30,000 refinery workers set to expire as US oil stocks jump after Trump's attack on Venezuela

Tom Hall**5 January 2026**

Refinery workers: tell us what you are fighting for in the next contract! All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The national contract covering roughly 30,000 refinery and petrochemical workers across the United States is set to expire on January 31, opening a struggle with significant global ramifications that requires an independent, international strategy by workers.

Refinery workers, who are members of the United Steelworkers, are determined to win inflation-busting wage increases, improved safety measures and job guarantees in the face of AI-drive job cuts and the transition to renewable energy.

Research firm OPIS reports: "AI is being widely deployed by oil-and-gas companies to automate complex tasks, reduce costs and maximize yields. Some refinery companies have adopted AI to predict equipment failures in scheduling turnaround maintenance and to fine-tune units to optimize production." Given the experience in other industries, this drive toward automation will translate into layoffs, particularly among maintenance and safety personnel.

Refinery workers are facing off against the oil industry as Trump has launched a brazen attack on Venezuela aimed at seizing the country's energy resources. The administration has issued threats against countries across the Western Hemisphere, treating the region as the property of the United States.

Oil stocks jumped when markets opened Monday morning following the weekend attack. Chevron rose as much as 10 percent in pre-market trading before ending the day up 5.1 percent. ExxonMobil gained 2.2 percent, while ConocoPhillips rose 2.6 percent. The energy sector was the highest-performing segment of the S&P 500.

The market reactions underscore whose interests are being served. When Trump openly declares "we intend to run the country," this means handing over control to US oil and gas corporations. Venezuela possesses the world's largest proven crude oil reserves, surpassing even Saudi Arabia. Another major factor behind the move against Venezuela is preparation for war with China, Venezuela's largest export partner and the primary target of Trump's tariffs.

If stock prices did not rise even higher, this likely reflects

statements from within the industry warning about the sheer expense of US investments in Venezuela's energy infrastructure, which would require years to recoup.

The fight for jobs and working conditions in the refineries is inseparable from a struggle against a government of the oligarchy that is launching wars around the world, including against the population of the United States itself. This raises the need for international unity among workers and the rejection of the "America First" program promoted by the union bureaucracy.

The invasion also functions as a partial bailout of the oil industry. While crude oil has largely been spared from tariffs, operating costs have been significantly impacted, and Deloitte estimates that trade measures could lead to as much as \$50 billion in project delays. Nevertheless, the industry continues to rake in massive profits, with refining margins reaching multi-year highs in November, according to Reuters.

At the same time, workers must confront the role of the union bureaucracy. The USW forced through the last national contract in 2022, negotiated in secret with the Biden White House, which included paltry wage increases totaling just 12 percent spread over four years. Given record inflation, this amounted to a substantial real pay cut. USW President Tom Conway even boasted that the contract "did not contribute significantly to inflation," in other words that wages would not keep up with prices.

Another major factor shaping the 2022 agreement was the USW bureaucracy's desire not to disrupt the launch of the US-backed proxy war against Russia in Ukraine with a major strike on the home front. US energy corporations profited enormously by selling natural gas to Europe to replace Russian supplies cut off by sanctions.

The blocking of the strike in 2022 by the USW allowed the corporations to increase the exploitation of refinery workers and undermine basic safety conditions. With the complicity of the union bureaucracy, the companies rushed turnarounds, imposed exhausting work schedules and ignored workers' safety complaints.

On September 20, 2022, Ben and Max Morrissey, two

brothers, ages 32 and 34, were burned to death in an explosion and fire at the BP Husky oil refinery in Oregon, Ohio, just outside of Toledo.

Conditions inside refineries have become increasingly untenable. One study by Arnold & Itkin LLP showed that explosions more than tripled between 2018 and 2022. Data compiled by Asset Optimization indicate that fires and explosions nearly quadrupled between 2019 and 2024 compared with the previous six-year period.

These disasters are the product of relentless overwork, with largely antiquated refineries operating at roughly 93 percent of capacity as the industry closes facilities and concentrates operations. Last year, Phillips 66 shut down its Los Angeles refinery, while LyondellBasell closed a major facility in Houston. Valero is planning to close its Benicia, California refinery by April of this year.

This is compounded by massive bipartisan deregulation, which has reached a new stage under Trump. The administration has moved to shut down the Chemical Safety Board, which investigates accidents involving toxic chemical releases. As of last September, the Environmental Protection Agency has stopped requiring oil refineries and other major industrial facilities to collect and report data on their greenhouse gas emissions.

The latest major disaster occurred at Chevron's El Segundo refinery outside Los Angeles last October, when an explosion sent a fireball into the sky that could be seen and felt for miles. There were no fatalities, but the incident was the latest in a string of deadly industrial accidents across the United States. This includes the explosion at the Clairton Coke Works near Pittsburgh that killed two workers in August, a blast at a Tennessee munitions plant that killed 16 in October, and the fiery crash of a UPS cargo jet that killed 15 people in Louisville last November.

Safety was a major issue during the last national refinery strike in 2015. However, the USW called out only a minority of its total membership and rigidly policed picket lines to block broader action. The strike was shut down without workers' demands being met, locking them into a six-year agreement.

In 2022, the USW also isolated a strike by 500 workers at the Richmond, California refinery. It has done the same to Libbey Glass workers in Toledo, Ohio who have been on strike for more than four months. In the steel industry, union officials have maintained a guilty silence following the deadly explosion at Clairton Coke Works.

These betrayals flow from the political orientation and function of the USW. It is one of several unions embracing Trump's "America First" trade war, falsely claiming this will save "American" jobs at the expense of workers elsewhere. The union leadership vociferously opposed the proposed merger of US Steel with Nippon Steel on protectionist grounds.

In a statement issued over the summer, the union's only criticism was that tariffs should be paired with "wider trade

policy reform." The Canadian section of the USW issued a statement opposing tariffs against Canada, while demanding them against the rest of the world.

The reality is starkly different. Massive layoffs continue unabated, with 1.2 million announced in the United States alone last year. Globally, oil and gas companies have announced sweeping job cuts. They include up to a quarter of the global workforce at ConocoPhillips, 20 percent at Chevron, 2,000 cuts at ExxonMobil, and 7,000 jobs targeted at BP. These are part of a coordinated campaign by the ruling elite worldwide that will accelerate in the new year.

The union bureaucracy, dominated by anticomunism and nationalism and by its support for the "right" of corporations to profit, has long been integrated into the political establishment. It maintained deep ties to the Biden White House, which compared its importance to the administration to a "domestic NATO." Now, it is auditioning for roles within the new regime Trump is seeking to establish.

Workers cannot defend their interests in any country while being pitted against their brothers and sisters elsewhere for the profits of their "own" capitalists. An estimated 31.9 million workers are employed in the oil and gas industry worldwide. This represents the potential for a powerful, unified international movement rejecting war for oil and waging a joint struggle against unsafe conditions, layoffs, and stagnant or declining wages.

Such a movement requires independence from the corporate-controlled parties and the building of rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the union apparatus to the workers themselves. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is leading this fight.

Oil workers should form rank-and-file committees to prepare a genuine struggle independent of management, the political establishment, and their enforcers in the union bureaucracy. They must prepare for a nationwide strike, without which the corporations will never concede to workers' demands. This struggle must be organized and directed by workers themselves, with rank-and-file control over all bargaining, to prevent another sellout co-authored behind closed doors with the White House.



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