30,000 refinery workers face contract expiration amid growing working class struggle

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The national contract covering roughly 30,000 oil refinery workers across the United States expires at midnight Sunday morning. These workers account for approximately two-thirds of total US refining capacity, placing them at the center of the country's energy infrastructure and the global oil supply chain.

Workers are demanding substantial wage increases to offset years of inflation, as well as job protections amid the growing introduction of artificial intelligence and automation, particularly in maintenance operations. Safety, as always in the refinery industry, remains a central issue, with workers facing dangerous conditions intensified by understaffing, forced overtime and cost-cutting.

The expiration of of the refinery contract occurs amidst growing class sturggle in the US. Fifteen thousand nurses in New York City have been on strike for three weeks, while 31,000 Kaiser Permanente workers launched a strike this week. At the same time, support is growing for a general strike against the ICE rampage in Minneapolis, with major demonstrations planned for Friday and Saturday.

There is mounting anger against the corporate oligarchy, which is attacking jobs and living standards while trampling democratic rights. Refinery workers must consciously link up with this developing movement, combining their struggle into a broader fight against the corporate oligarchy. Workers should take the initiative by holding meetings, voting on non-negotiable demands, preparing for strike action and establishing lines of contact with workers in other industries.

Last year alone, 1.2 million layoffs were announced, including tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs concentrated in the auto industry. Tens of thousands more layoffs have taken place in logistics, with new rounds of cuts announced at UPS and Amazon. At the same time, workers are fighting to expose unsafe conditions and workplace deaths caused by reckless profiteering.

According to Bloomberg, total employment in the US oil and gas industry has declined by roughly 250,000 jobs since 2014, even as output has surged by 50 percent. Bloomberg attributes this to "new technologies to drill faster for cheaper, corporate mergers, and robots replacing humans on rigs." Since the start of 2023 alone, the industry has carried out more than $500 billion in mergers and acquisitions, while rigs on average now produce four times as much as they did a decade ago.

One expert cited by Bloomberg stated bluntly that offshore oil rigs in the near future will "be entirely run by robots and automation." Similar processes are underway in refineries, where artificial intelligence is being introduced to schedule predictive maintenance, carry out real-time process optimization and centralize operations, not to improve safety but to eliminate maintenance and operator jobs.

Refinery workers cannot wait for the United Steelworkers bureaucracy to organize a struggle. The union leadership has spent years isolating workers and imposing sellout contracts. With only days remaining before the contract expiration, the USW has not even called a strike authorization vote. There has been a remarkable silence from the union for months. The August conference of the National Oil Bargaining Program issued only a vague platform with no concrete demands, while talks with the lead negotiator, Marathon Petroleum, began only last week, with no significant updates as of this writing.

On Wednesday, the USW sent out a text update declaring that it had unanimously rejected an unspecified company proposal. There are unconfirmed reports that the offer amounted to a provocative 10 percent increase. If this is true, there is no justification for delay, and such hesitation only encourages Marathon and the other oil giants to escalate their demands for concessions.

The last national refinery strike in 2015 involved only a handful of facilities. Although safety was the central issue, the strike was shut down without any significant changes, aside from the establishment of toothless union-management committees.

The current contract provided only 12 percent in wage increases over three years, beginning with 2.5 percent upon ratification and rising to 3.5 percent last February. At the time, the USW openly boasted that the deal "did not contribute to inflationary pressures," which was then at its highest level in decades. In plain language, this meant that wages lagged far behind price increases, amounting to a cut in real wages.

That contract was worked out in close consultation with the Biden White House, whose principal concern was keeping the industry operating during the lead-up to the war in Ukraine, with the Ukrainian military acting as proxies for US and European imperialism against Russia. The cutoff of Russian oil and gas exports to Europe greatly benefited American producers, who capitalized on the exclusion of their rivals from a major market.

Today, the Trump administration is not only dismantling regulations on the oil industry, he has kidnapped the president of Venezuela in order to seize the country's oil resources and is preparing for war against Iran, another major oil producer. This shows that workers are engaged in a struggle not only against corporate executives but in a political fight against the entire political establishment.

In 2022, the USW kept workers on the job past the contract expiration and isolated workers locked out at ExxonMobil's Beaumont refinery, who had already been out since May of the previous year. In addition to the inadequate national wage "increases," the local Beaumont agreement granted ExxonMobil the ability to modify benefits at any time and provided no job protections.

Repeated attempts by refinery workers to fight management have run up against the imposed isolation enforced by the union bureaucracy. In 2022, following ratification, the USW isolated a two-month strike at Chevron's Richmond, California refinery. In late 2024, a strike at Marathon's Detroit refinery was sold out by the Teamsters union.

Since the ratification of the current contract, oil companies have worked to exploit workers to the hilt. Refinery capacity utilization has hovered around 90 percent or more, according to the US Energy Information Administration. Over the past year, the LyondellBasell refinery in Houston and the Phillips 66 refinery in Los Angeles shut down, while Valero's Benicia refinery is scheduled to close this April.

This intensified exploitation has been accompanied by a series of major industrial disasters. Last October, a massive explosion at Chevron's El Segundo refinery rocked the Los Angeles area. Miraculously, no injuries were reported.

Other disasters include an August 2022 fire at Valero's Texas City refinery near Houston, a September 2022 explosion at the BP-Husky refinery in Toledo, Ohio, which killed two workers, an October 2025 explosion at the HF Sinclair Navajo refinery that injured several workers, and a January 16 fire in the alkylation unit at Marathon's Galveston Bay refinery. The latter facility occupies the same site as the former BP Texas City refinery, where a catastrophic explosion in 2005 killed 15 workers and injured 180.

A genuine struggle cannot be waged through backroom talks, selective actions, or appeals to the union apparatus that has repeatedly enforced isolation and defeat. What is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the USW bureaucracy, to transfer power directly to workers on the shop floor.

Such committees must fight to unite refinery workers nationally and internationally, link up with nurses, logistics workers, autoworkers, and immigrants facing state repression, and advance a political program that places human need, safety and democratic control of production above corporate profit. The fight confronting refinery workers is not a narrow contract dispute but part of a broader struggle by the working class against the capitalist system itself.