

Workers furious after USW announce sellout deal for 30,000 refinery workers

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Refinery workers: Speak out on the tentative agreement by filling out the form below! All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Workers reacted with anger Friday afternoon after the United Steelworkers (USW) announced a sellout national agreement covering roughly 30,000 refinery workers across the United States. The contract, which falls far short of workers' demands, was unveiled suddenly nearly a week after the previous agreement had expired, without any meaningful explanation or advance notice to the membership.

According to information workers are receiving from the union, the contract contains only a 15 percent wage increase spread over four years, in increments of 4 percent, 3.5 percent, 3.5 percent and 4 percent. Beyond this, the only notable provisions are the maintenance of health care coverage at current levels and the continuation of letter agreements from the prior deal.

The USW did not include the actual contract terms in the brief announcements posted to its website or distributed through its text update service, further fueling anger and suspicion among refinery workers.

The deal falls far short even of the program the USW itself passed at its National Oil Bargaining Program (NOBP) bargaining convention last August. That policy called for a 25 percent wage increase over four years, structured in 10-5-5-5 increments, between two and eight weeks of vacation depending on seniority, company contributions to 401(k) plans toward retiree medical costs for workers without company-sponsored plans, caps on health insurance premium rates at 2025 levels, and shift differentials of between 5 and 10 percent for evening and overnight work.

The NOBP policy also called for guarantees that artificial intelligence would not be used to eliminate jobs. Oil and gas corporations, like the rest of the corporate world, are aggressively deploying AI as part of a drive to slash labor costs, beginning with maintenance, inspection and safety-related positions.

The absence of any binding language protecting jobs from new technologies opens the door to a bloodbath of layoffs, similar to what followed the ratification of the auto and UPS contracts in 2023, which were pushed through on false pretenses. AI-driven layoffs would likely contribute to safety conditions only worsening. Last October, an explosion at Chevron's El Segundo refinery rocked the Los Angeles area, with the fire being seen, and the blast being felt, for miles.

The announcement of the tentative agreement touched off a furious response, testifying to a growing mood of resistance among refinery workers and the working class as a whole. This anger must be consciously organized and brought to bear against the sellout.

"Our patience is gone"

Workers have taken to social media to denounce the deal and the role of the union apparatus. One wrote, "Did not at all represent us in what we wanted. Spineless gutless cowards that sold us down the river. This is absolutely shameful."

Another commented, "The union is laying in the same bed with these companies. They accepted the deal Monday. They took five days to drink and eat high dollar meals acting like they were fighting for more. That's why there was no communication, they were not fighting, they already settled."

A longer statement captured the depth of anger and exhaustion felt by many refinery workers:

I have been around long enough to know when we are being fed a line. We are [busting] our asses day in and day out with long shifts, mandatory overtime, missed holidays, broken sleep, wear and tear that doesn't show up in any of their spreadsheets ... so forgive me if I'm not in the mood for smiles and slogans. We don't want happy laughing videos of our representation going to the table like they are meeting an old friend. We don't need cheerleaders. We don't need 'everything is going great' energy while we are getting low-balled at the table. We want some fire! We want to see a serious leadership that is just as pissed off as we are! Because out in these refineries it's very focused and the patience is gone.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a worker on the Gulf Coast said, "The offer that's being presented for us to vote on includes essentially nothing other than a series of raises that are slightly higher than what we get every time. The offered 15 percent total over four years will not allow us to recover from the loss in real wages incurred over the last contract, let alone provide us with any relief from the worsening economic situation we currently live in."

Another refinery worker told the WSWS, "I'm livid and sick and beyond disappointed. But unless we dismantle capitalism this is our reality and this is our future, only worse."

USW prepared to isolate BP Whiting workers

Particularly treacherous is the way the deal would isolate workers at BP's Whiting refinery in northwest Indiana. There, the company is demanding massive concessions and attempting to pull the facility out of the national bargaining framework altogether. BP is also demanding that workers waive their legal rights related to the implementation of AI, laying the groundwork for sweeping job cuts. Talks with USW Local 7-1 have collapsed, with the union telling workers to prepare for a strike that workers had already authorized by 98 percent.

The USW bureaucracy is attempting to repeat the isolation of refinery strikes at Richmond, California and Beaumont, Texas during the last round of negotiations in 2022, when workers were left to fight alone while the union rushed to settle nationally.

Build rank-and-file committees to fight the sellout! For a national refinery strike!

Workers must reject this contract by the widest possible margin. But a "no" vote alone is not sufficient. It must mark the beginning of a rank-and-file rebellion that overrides the bureaucratic sabotage and enforces the democratic will of the membership.

Mass meetings must be organized immediately, in person or online, to elect rank-and-file refinery workers to a national rank-and-file committee. This body must coordinate a unified struggle against the sellout and prepare collective action across all refineries.

The bargaining committee should be thrown out. It has not been involved in genuine bargaining but in a conspiracy against workers conducted behind their backs. It must be replaced by a committee composed exclusively of active refinery workers, with all negotiations live-streamed and all strategy and actions during talks subject to discussion, approval and override by the membership.

The USW bureaucracy is rushing to sell out workers precisely because refinery workers are in a position of enormous strength. They account for roughly two-thirds of US refining capacity. Domestic oil and gas production is at record levels, while refinery utilization rates are as high as 95 percent. In the event of a national strike, the corporations would have no easy alternatives.

Federal filings show that the USW controls more than \$1.7 billion in assets, financed entirely from workers' dues, which totaled more than \$300 million in the last reported 12-month period. At \$1,000 a week, there is enough in the USW's treasury to provide strike pay to refinery workers for more than a year. This is workers' money and must be used to provision a real struggle.

A serious national strike would threaten the financial interests of the union apparatus. The union spent \$97 million on so-called "representational activities," \$26 million on "general overhead," and \$16 million on "union administration," all of which primarily fund the salaries and privileges of the bureaucracy. It spent \$115 million on investments and fixed assets, but only \$3 million on strike pay.

There is no doubt that the tentative agreement was also worked out in collaboration with the White House, as was the last deal. Then USW President Tom Conway met with Biden during talks and openly boasted that the deal, which provided only an 11 percent raise over three years, did "does not add to inflationary pressures," meaning that workers were deliberately made poorer as wages lagged behind the rising cost of living. A central concern of the Biden administration

was keeping the "home front" under control as it prepared for a major new war against Russia in Ukraine, which broke out the day after the contract was finalized.

Today's contract is being pushed through amid expanding imperialist wars for control of oil and strategic resources, including US aggression against Venezuela and preparations for conflict with Iran, with China, a major importer of oil from these countries as the ultimate target. At the same time, it is aimed at suppressing domestic opposition under conditions of growing resistance to Trump's emerging police-state dictatorship.

A refinery strike would win immense support from the broader working class, which is moving into struggle against the corporate oligarchy. Tens of thousands of nurses on both coasts are striking against for-profit health care. Teachers in San Francisco are preparing to strike, while tens of thousands of graduate students in the University of California system are voting on strike action.

Hundreds of thousands of public-sector workers in New York City have contracts expiring this year. Logistics workers are fighting mass layoffs at companies like UPS, imposed with the assistance of the Teamsters bureaucracy. The contracts for 25,000 steelworkers also expire later this year, and they would support and welcome a fight by fellow USW members.

Growing calls for a general strike in response to ICE shootings in Minneapolis reflect a broader mood in the population, which is increasingly looking to the working class for leadership. There is a growing understanding that only the collective power of the working class, the source of all wealth, can resolve the deep social, political and economic crisis gripping the United States. A national refinery strike would be a powerful catalyst for such a movement.

As one retiree told the WSWS, "Until not just the oil industry, but a majority of work sectors call a nation wide strike, the middle class will never catch up, much less get ahead."

The primary obstacle to such a movement is the union bureaucracy, which is refusing to call actions even when workers' democratic rights are at stake. Workers must oppose this obstacle by developing their own independent organization and initiative through rank-and-file committees, not waiting for "permission" from above by pro-corporate officials.



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