

With strike looming, BP Whiting refinery workers rally to defend jobs, wages and safety

Kristina Betinis
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About 200 BP workers, families and supporters gathered in Amoco Park in northwest Indiana on Saturday and marched to the entrance of the BP Whiting refinery to picket against management's demands for sweeping concessions even deeper than the industry-wide pattern agreement announced two weeks ago.

For three weeks now, BP and United Steelworkers local 7-1 have been negotiating based on a day-to-day extension. The company is demanding the facility be taken out of the pattern bargaining with a six-year contract which includes pay reductions of up to 20 percent, 100 jobs cut and workers waiving legal rights limiting the use of artificial intelligence at the refinery. The company is also pushing for invasive workplace monitoring and restructuring job advancement.

Not only are jobs, pay and working conditions at stake, but also community and environmental safety. The refinery is surrounded on three sides by suburban neighborhoods and sits on the shore of the largest source of fresh water within the US.

Opposition to the company's proposals is enormous at Whiting, which voted 98 percent to strike. But if the USW's pattern agreement is accepted at other refineries, it sets the stage for a strike to be isolated, giving management the upper hand.

The International Workers Alliance for Rank and File Committees (IWA-RFC) issued a statement outlining a program of action by oilworkers to unify and assert their democratic will, "Oil workers: Reject the national agreement! Mobilize to prevent isolation of BP Whiting workers!"

It declared: "If they can take one facility off pattern, then nobody is safe: management will divide and conquer workers facility by facility. Reports have already been received that the Ineos plant in Texas City is also attempting to go off pattern."

At the rally, United Steelworkers Local 7-1 President Eric Schultz denounced BP's demand to replace union workers in the environmental department with 100 contract workers from Louisiana "to take our jobs for half as much."

"They want to eliminate our highest responsibility operator jobs. They want to take those responsibilities and give them to management, take our associated pay away. They want us to trust them to run the unit," Schultz told the *The Times of Northwest Indiana*.

One family member of a BP worker said she was proud to be out there to support BP workers. "We have had to cut every nonessential expense" to prepare for a strike, she said. "We cut Netflix. But yeah, we're ready to fight."

Other workers and family members said they were very concerned about their ability to provide for their families with the constant pressure to cut wages and lower labor costs.

Anger at the USW bureaucracy's attempts to isolate the facility was palpable among Whiting workers who spoke separately with the WWS. "The USW's stance *should* be every refinery signs or we go out...plain and simple," one worker said.

Another said: "I feel that our union leaders are selling us down the river to say the least. It always starts from the top and I believe National has slit our Local 7-1 throats (metaphorically) as well as every USW local."

Another worker recalled the selective national strike in 2015, which the Whiting refinery was a part of. However, the facility was left out on its own for a

month after most refineries were sent back to work. “Now we’re being left out to dry. They’re saying, ‘Hey, we support you if you strike, but we’re going to go back to work with this crap deal.’ ... Like, they’re not even saying, ‘Okay, we’re going to pause at our national negotiation table. We’re going to start picking refineries again. Let’s do some damage.’”

He warned that allowing BP to impose concessions at this refinery would have repercussions everywhere. “Everyone thought that this would never happen to us because it’s such a big refinery, the biggest one in the Midwest. It’s 500,000 barrels. So you better bet that if it can happen to us... it will happen to you. It’s just a question of this contract or four years down the road?”

As Friday’s IWA-RFC statement concluded: “Urgent action is required. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) calls on refinery workers to take the following measures:

- **Reject the contract!** The entire process lacks legitimacy. Marathon negotiated with a “bargaining” team that flagrantly violated members’ instructions, operating behind a wall of silence. Workers should accept no deal that does not, at a minimum, meet the program ratified by the membership

- **Hold meetings and elect rank-and-file committees made up of trusted workers—not career union officials.** The current bargaining team should be replaced with a new one composed exclusively of active refinery workers.

- **Acting through these committees, establish lines of communication across facilities, bypassing the control of the USW officialdom.** Refinery workers have every right to take whatever national action is necessary, up to and including a national strike, to win their demands and prevent the isolation of BP Whiting. The USW’s \$1.8 billion in assets—financed by workers’ dues—must be put toward the struggle and strike pay, not the salaries of bureaucrats.”



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