

BP Whiting workers denounce USW betrayal, call for national strike to defend jobs

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18 February 2026

The struggle of 30,000 refinery workers across the United States has reached a critical turning point as the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy moves to ratify a national pattern agreement that flagrantly ignores the membership's core demands. This "pattern" deal, negotiated in secret, provides only 15 percent wage increases over four years—a figure that represents a significant retreat from the 25 percent increase workers initially authorized and fails to keep pace with the soaring cost of living. Behind a wall of silence, the USW leadership is attempting to push through a contract that ensures real-wage cuts while leaving workers vulnerable to the aggressive implementation of artificial intelligence and automation to cut jobs.

While the USW leadership attempts to shut down the struggle nationally, they have intentionally left the 800 workers at BP's Whiting refinery in Northwest Indiana to face management alone. BP is aggressively attempting to pull the Whiting facility off the national pattern, demanding a six-year contract that includes deeper pay cuts, the elimination of dozens of jobs and the right to implement automation without oversight. Despite a 98 percent strike authorization vote at the facility—a powerful expression of the rank and file's determination to fight—the USW International has kept workers on the job under a series of day-to-day extensions, effectively paralyzing their leverage while the company prepares for a potential lockout.

Last Saturday, approximately 200 workers and their families held a defiant rally outside the Whiting refinery, the largest in the Midwest, to protest the isolation of their facility and the betrayal of the national bargaining program. In interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site*, workers provided a damning indictment of both the oil giant's greed and the union bureaucracy's complicity. Their testimonies reveal extreme operational hazards, a stage-managed negotiation process and a growing

rebellion against a union leadership that many now view as an adjunct of corporate management.

A central theme among Whiting workers is that BP is using the current negotiations to fundamentally restructure the workforce, replacing experienced USW members with cheaper, non-union contract labor. A 20-year veteran operator at the plant explained that the company's refusal to follow the national pattern is a calculated move to facilitate this transition.

"They want to get us off pattern because they want no-pain contractors to come in here and do this job," the worker said. "And it's like, you guys don't know what we do. They've hired these headhunters—Christo Franco and John DeAndrea. Franco comes from Exxon. They have all these team people from Exxon that come in here to head hunt and try to turn this into something it isn't."

For the workers, the restructuring is not merely a matter of wages and jobs; it is a matter of life and death. The operator described a "Band-Aid" safety culture where management rushes repairs and ignores long-term fixes to maintain production at any cost. "They cut short the turnarounds," he noted. "They're making us run pumps without back ups. So you're making us unsafe already. It's just another Band-Aid they put on the problem. They didn't fix it correctly. They're going to hurt somebody that way."

"We've had two near disasters in the last two years in this place," another worker shared. "We had a full plant wide evacuation in February of 2024, and then we had another plant wide evacuation where no lessons were learned. It was chaos all over again. Everybody's out, nobody's telling you where to go. Supervisors not even checking in with the team to find out if everybody's okay. The flares were shooting 100 feet of fluid—they looked like geysers."

The worker emphasized that the company's drive for profit has led to a complete disregard for the surrounding

community. “The place smelled for weeks. They don’t want to spend money on a lightning rod or a transformer. That was a cheap \$30,000 fix. Small potatoes. Instead, it shut the plant down. These people are pushing for lower headcounts and higher profits. They couldn’t give a rat’s ass about safety.”

The anger at BP management is matched by a profound sense of betrayal regarding the USW International’s handling of the national contract. Workers characterized the negotiation process as a “smoke and mirrors show” designed to keep the rank and file in the dark until a deal is finalized behind closed doors. One veteran observed that the union provides the “least amount of information” possible, keeping workers guessing until an agreement is rushed out.

“We got a bunch of text messages and it seemed like the negotiations weren’t going anywhere, and then boom—they have a contract proposal,” the worker said. “I don’t get it. They folded so quick it was embarrassing. They couldn’t even get them to 16 percent [wage increase]. Why did you tell us 25? Why even start at 25 if you’re just going to fold like a lawn chair on a Sunday after a baseball game?”

The worker was particularly critical of the fraternization between union officials and management. “Some people like to make friends with the boss. I don’t like to cross that line because supervisors are supervisors, workers are workers. That’s how I was taught by the old generation.”

Speaking to the anti-democratic character of the USW the worker shared that he was met with obstruction when raising criticisms of the negotiations. “My union president didn’t like it when I questioned him. I’m like, ‘Well, I’m trying to help you guys up.’ But they are trading deals behind us.”

Another worker highlighted the union’s role in isolating specific groups within the workforce, such as those facing job cuts in the environmental and craft departments. “We had an informative meeting, but it was for the whole membership, and people who weren’t related to the buyout were commenting. Let the people in the groups that are getting cut have the floor! We have a right to hear their questions answered.”

“I’ve been talking to a lot of guys, and a lot of them are scared,” the operator admitted. “They’re scared of losing their job. The company makes it seem like they could run it without us. I talked with one guy who felt we might lose our jobs if it goes to a strike. But I just feel like we really have all the power, but we need to be in there together to pull the trigger.”

“You get used as a pawn in a chess game,” one worker warned. “And once they got what they want, they leave you hanging out to dry. BP is trying to get us on a six-year deal to get us off pattern. Every oil company is looking at BP right now to see what happens. If it happens to us, get ready, because the next one is you. It will happen. Everyone thought it would never happen to this refinery because it’s so big, but if it can happen to us, it will happen to you.”

The isolation of the Whiting workers is finding growing resistance from other USW locals nationwide. A refinery worker from California reached out to the WSWS to express solidarity and condemn the proposed national deal, making it clear that the anger is not confined to Whiting.

“Many members feel betrayed by the national and feel slighted by them taking what seems like a very weak deal from Marathon at the bargaining table,” the California worker stated. “We feel like what BP said about not even considering the proposal for their Whiting plant should have been immediate grounds to call a strike at that plant and others around the country in a show of solidarity.”

The worker continued: “Anybody who would agree to that proposal with no AI protection is a clown. To think we are the only industry exempt from AI being used is naive. We also feel they bent over and took it real easy—no fight at all, no concessions from the company. The 15 percent deal is garbage.”

The way forward for refinery workers lies in breaking the isolation imposed by the USW bureaucracy and linking Whiting workers with their brothers and sisters across the country to reject the sellout. The call for building rank-and-file committees is gaining traction as workers realize that the current union leadership serves as a barrier to, rather than a vehicle for, a real struggle.

“BP needs us; we don’t need them,” the worker concluded. “But we’re not in a position to win alone. Nobody is. That’s why we need a real organization—not a chess game played with our lives. We have to make sure we’re not just going to come over here and make the company money while they keep us unsafe. They’re going to pay me for what I’m doing, and they’re going to keep me safe. That’s where I’m at.”



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