

BP workers in Whiting, Indiana overwhelmingly reject concessions contract

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In a powerful 98.3 percent no vote, refinery workers in Whiting, Indiana near Chicago rejected BP's "last, best and final" offer in voting Thursday.

More than 94 percent of the more than 800 United Steelworkers 7-1 members voted, a turnout the union local president called "unprecedented."

The contract would have led to 100 fewer union workers and wider use of contract workers, \$8-10 hourly wage cuts, the closure of the environmental department, attacks on seniority and implementation of AI with no job protections. Worst of all, the contract would have lasted 6 years, removing the facility from the national pattern bargaining timeline and creating a precedent for the companies to divide and conquer workers one refinery at a time.

Since the last contract expired on January 31, BP and United Steelworkers Local 7-1 have kept the Midwest's largest refinery operating on 24-hour rolling contract renewals. A company spokesman said BP would continue to negotiate.

"It should have been 100 percent!" one BP Whiting worker told the WSWs. Expressing frustration with the USW's delays in calling workers out, he added: "I am guessing we will go out soon but I think that will be forced by lockout rather than a walk out on strike."

Another BP Whiting worker said: "A strike will show we aren't taking it lightly. They want to seriously cut wages, cut jobs, put operations on a tier and cause more OT. Enough is enough. They are going to treat us with dignity or they are going to have to stop bluffing and be ready for an all out war!"

He continued: "We aren't just fighting for USW. We are fighting for all the other Unions out there holding on by a thread. BP thought we would be the whipping dogs. They weren't prepared for the little guys to stand up to them."

The resounding "no" vote was met with vocal support and encouragement from nearby steelworkers and community members.

One Hammond, Indiana steelworker said, "Don't give them an inch! Great job BP brothers and sisters."

Steelworkers commenting on Facebook news media posts wrote, "Local 1011, right next door. Stay strong, fight hard!!!" and "USW 1010 member. Stay strong guys, standing in solidarity with y'all. We're next for negotiations. God bless us all."

Need for rank and file initiative

There is enormous support for the Whiting workers' struggle. But rejection of the agreement alone is not enough. The resounding NO vote must become the starting point of a broader movement uniting Whiting workers with the 30,000 refinery workers covered by the USW national agreement, and the tens of thousands of contractors working in refineries across the US.

The attack on Whiting is a test case for the entire industry and its 30,000 USW members. If BP succeeds here, every oil company will follow the same playbook.

But the USW bureaucracy has deliberately allowed Whiting workers to be isolated despite the national implications of the struggle. Across the rest of the industry, it is rushing to impose the national "pattern" agreement announced last month. That deal provides wage increases of just 15 percent spread over four years, contains no meaningful improvements to safety and includes no protections against job losses through automation.

Moreover, it lets companies continue working refinery employees to the bone as sweeping technological changes that threaten thousands of jobs are being prepared. The pattern deal itself was reached in open defiance of the clear instructions given by the membership when it voted on the National Oil Bargaining Program last year.

The WSWS has also characterized it as a war contract, since it would provide for labor peace at precisely the point when the oil and gas companies stand to make gang buster profits from rising oil prices due to the Iran war.

This is why the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees calls for this fight to be transformed into a common struggle of refinery workers everywhere, drawing behind them workers in other industries.

This unity can only come from initiative taken by workers themselves.

Whiting workers can establish a rank-and-file committee to organize the struggle, independent of the USW apparatus. This committee should reach out directly to refinery workers at other plants, share information about the contract fight and prepare coordinated action to defend wages, safety and jobs throughout the industry, up to and including nationwide strike action.

The central task facing Whiting workers now is uniting across plants, breaking up the isolation of their struggle by BP and the USW apparatus.

A rank-and-file committee should establish lines of communication with refinery workers across the country, as well as with the steelworkers throughout northwest Indiana and workers across the broader Chicagoland region. There is clearly widespread sentiment for united struggle, as the outcome of this fight sets the precedent for steelworkers whose contracts expire later this year.

Every refinery worker has a direct stake in defeating BP's demands. The proposed agreement contains attacks on a scale without precedent in recent decades.



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