BP locks out Whiting, Indiana workers after decisive rejection of “last, best and final” agreement

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After workers overwhelmingly rejected the offer negotiated by BP (British Petroleum) and the United Steelworkers, the company announced it was locking out nearly 900 Whiting, Indiana refinery workers as of 12:00 a.m. on Thursday, March 19.

BP confirmed it intends to continue to operate the largest refinery in the Midwest without the highly skilled United Steelworkers employees.

Last Thursday, workers voted against BP’s last offer by 98.3 percent. Turnout was over 94 percent. The workers, members of USW Local 7-1, expressed their determination to fight relentless attacks on wages, living standards, working conditions and job security.

The agreement would have led to 100 fewer union workers and broader 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. Worse still, the six-year agreement would have removed the facility from the national pattern bargaining timeline, creating a precedent for the oil companies to divide and conquer workers one refinery at a time.

Negotiations between USW Local 7-1 and BP are reportedly ongoing. The company said the lockout could be avoided if the union accepts its counteroffer from earlier this week of the same agreement but with a signing bonus of $2,500, reduced from $7,500—a kick in the teeth.

Local 7-1 President Eric Schultz stated, “BP is obviously not serious about reaching a ?deal that ?doesn’t include cutting jobs, reducing wages and eliminating bargaining rights.”

Lockout at Whiting is a political struggle

Every refinery worker has a direct stake in defeating BP’s demands at Whiting. The proposed agreement contains attacks on a scale without precedent in recent years. Whiting is also the largest refinery in the Midwest, producing 440,000 barrels daily, including gasoline, diesel and jet fuel.

The WSWS has characterized the agreement BP is trying to impose as a war contract: securing “labor peace” at just the point when the oil and gas giants stand to make historic profits from the rising oil prices caused by the illegal war against Iran. Intelligence firm Rystad Energy predicts that US oil makers could make an extra $63.4 billion if the price of oil averages above $100 a barrel this year.

Whiting workers are putting their struggle into directly political terms. One Whiting worker told the WSWS, “I certainly don’t expect this to be quick unless these fascists in charge decide to intervene and force us back to work [with an injunction], which is a real possibility. I can say with certainty that Congress is filled with cowards.”

Workers are angry over the USW’s refusal to call a strike much sooner, as the last agreement expired at the end of January. Allowing the refinery to remain up and running on a rolling 24-hour contract renewal undermined the negotiations and gave BP additional leverage.

Whiting workers speaking with the WSWS expect there to be serious problems early on that will prevent the refinery from operating at capacity. The dangers of

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operating the refinery with temporary and contract labor are enormous. Such a high volume refinery, surrounded by residential neighborhoods and sitting on the shore of the largest body of fresh water within the US risks serious injury, major equipment failure and environmental damage.

As the American ruling class embraces total criminality, plunging into a war against Iran while trying to impose a dictatorship at home and looting what remains of public resources, a powerful, progressive counter-movement is emerging within the working class. It can be seen in the strike of almost 4,000 JBS meatpackers in Greeley, Colorado, in the determination of Whiting workers to defeat BP's attempts to reduce every worker to the level of contract workers, in the popular calls for a general strike against the Trump administration which emerged in the course of the mass demonstrations against ICE terror.

Independent rank-and-file action to unite across industry!

The central task facing Whiting workers is to break the isolation of their struggle and shift the balance of power towards the refinery workers, who have enormous power in this situation as a politically united force.

This is why the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) calls for this fight to be transformed into a common struggle of refinery workers everywhere, drawing in support from workers in other industries. The USW apparatus will do everything it can to block and undermine this, and it must be taken up the rank and file independently.

First, 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 Chicago region. The outcome of the refinery workers' struggle also sets a precedent for steelworkers, whose contracts expire later this year.

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.

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