

BP Whiting lockout continues towards second week

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Almost 900 workers at the BP Whiting refinery in northwest Indiana remain on the picket lines after being locked out by the oil giant on March 19. BP's "last, best and final offer" was nothing less than a declaration of war against the oil workers, with the company demanding job cuts, reductions in pay and free rein to introduce AI-based automation and further job cuts down the line.

With an output of around 440,000 barrels per day, the refinery is the largest inland facility in the country and the largest in the Midwest, refining crude from Canada and Texas delivered via pipeline.

Workers at the refinery are overwhelmingly united in their opposition to BP's demands. They voted by 98.3 percent to reject it, with a 94 percent turnout. Locked-out workers are receiving widespread support from the local community who are supporting the pickets and expressing solidarity with their struggle by dropping off food and other supplies.

Workers expressed concern not only for the attacks on their own jobs and living standards but for the environmental impact of the contract proposals and the lockout. The Whiting refinery is adjacent to residential neighborhoods and has a history of violating federal air quality standards. According to workers, BP intends to eliminate the entire Environmental Department at the refinery.

Workers noted that the refinery is over 100 years old and that their long experience gives them a much deeper understanding of how to avoid serious problems that might be missed by engineers and other salaried workers, who are not as close to the actual conditions at the plant. They say this is all the more true given BP's preference for quick fixes that maintain the refinery's output. Management's attempts to keep up output during the lockout creates a real danger of equipment damage or catastrophic failure.

As if to drive the point home, on Monday a massive

explosion rocked the Valero refinery in Port Arthur, Texas. No injuries were reported as of this writing, but this is the second major incident at a US refinery in the last six months, following an explosion at a refinery in the Los Angeles area last October.

Several workers the WSWS spoke to were on the list to lose their jobs as BP moves to eliminate 115 positions in "non-core" crafts, such as HVAC and the construction of scaffolding. Under BP's proposals, their job functions are to be transferred to contractors, who already make up a substantial part of the workforce.

According to the United Steelworkers (USW), 300 union jobs have been eliminated at the refinery since the 2015 sellout contract. An article in *Business Focus* magazine reports the plant's workforce is around 3,000, of whom 1,500 are contractors. Under a third are USW members.

Workers also expressed anger over BP's proposal to reclassify workers in order to cut their pay while claiming to raise average base wages by \$7 per hour over the next four years. BP also wants to impose a 6-year contract on the refinery, which would remove Whiting from the national pattern bargaining timeline and set a precedent for other facilities.

However, workers are being hamstrung by the leadership of the United Steelworkers (USW), which completely ceded the initiative to BP and gave the company ample time to train salaried workers and contractors to prepare for a lockout.

Workers are also being left on their own to deal with the financial repercussions of the lockout. The USW will not pay any benefits until three weeks have elapsed, and while Local 7-1 does have a strike fund, that money is reserved for those who are most in need, meaning most workers are totally on their own for several weeks. Workers are also on the hook for paying the full costs of their health insurance during the lockout. One worker

noted he lost \$20,000 during the last strike.

Union officials, including USW President Roxanne Brown, have called BP's decision to lock out workers "unacceptable and unlawful." Workers told the WSWS that BP wants to break the union, and that the provocative offer was not a serious attempt to get an agreement.

USW officials, however, are doing everything they can to isolate the strike. In February, they announced a national pattern agreement, now being imposed at other facilities, with a paltry 15 percent wage increase over four years. This is the second national contract in a row which will enable US oil and gas companies to make billions in bumper profits off of war-driven shortages. The deal was announced only days before the start of the war against Iran; the last contract was struck right at the start of the war in Ukraine.

BP is demanding a six-year contract at Whiting, removing the facility from national contract talks. Coming after a similar move by ExxonMobil at its plant in Beaumont, Texas, in 2022, this would create a precedent for management to divide and conquer refinery workers across the country.

The bureaucracy's overwhelming concern is to secure an agreement that keeps the dues money flowing into its pockets while avoiding any outbreak of militancy which could potentially break free from its suffocating control.

Refinery workers both at Whiting and across the country must organize to break the isolation of the strike and build a national movement uniting workers across the industry.

The beginning of an independent struggle must begin through the formation of a rank-and-file committee in the plant to take control out of the hands of the USW bureaucracy. This committee should link up with oil workers at other refineries around the country and turn the lockout into a nationwide strike against the oil companies to defend jobs, wages and safety.



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