

# BP Whiting lockout enters 4th week, as 1,700 Northern Indiana utility workers are locked out

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More than 850 BP oil workers remain locked out at the company's Whiting, Indiana refinery, the largest in the Midwest. After workers overwhelmingly rejected an insulting fourth offer negotiated by BP and the United Steelworkers Local 7-1, the company locked them out on March 19.

That 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 and 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.

As BP Whiting General Manager Chris DellaFranco issued a video statement reassuring the public that "all applicable safety and environmental regulations" are being followed, the refinery remains in operation with strikebreakers who have come in from out of state. Ads are also being run locally for replacement operators in Whiting for a term of 6 months and at the rate of \$127 per hour. The use of strikebreakers underscores the indifference of the giant energy company to the safety of those in the refinery, the surrounding community and Lake Michigan, the region's main source of drinking water.

One Whiting worker told the WSWS, "They will pay more than double the current operator wages for strikebreakers, yet say they cannot afford to pay our nationally bargained pay increases everyone else agreed to pay. It's union busting, and it's as simple as that."

Another Whiting operator said, "They can operate it now, but they can't do it forever. It won't be long in my opinion that they will be able to operate it. They've been

cutting back on maintenance prior to this too. That's going to end up biting them, I'm sure. It's a hazard.

"I believe they were trying to force us out on strike before they eventually locked us out. Our president told them we would even come back to work under the last contract. The GM (general manager) saying the ball's in our court is just lying. We've said we'll come back, we'll negotiate, we'll work. They're the ones that locked us out."

On the lockout and its relationship to the criminal US war against Iran, he said, "I know BP's the one that's caused the war! They're the ones who originally destabilized the Iranian government," he said, referring to the 1953 coup engineered by the CIA and UK's secret intelligence service MI6.

"To all the oil workers and the NIPSCO workers who got locked out, stay strong!"

## NIPSCO workers locked out

After months of negotiations and a 98 percent strike authorization vote, Northern Indiana Public Service Company (NIPSCO) locked out 1,700 members of the United Steelworkers Locals 12775 and 13796 on April 2. The lockout came after the union unanimously rejected the company's fourth "last, best and final" offer. NIPSCO stated the lockout "will remain in place until the Union agrees to the Company's last, best and final offer."

NIPSCO is the largest natural gas distribution company in the state, and the second largest electric distribution company. Its parent company NiSource has reported a full-

year net income of \$905.2 million. Yet NIPSCO is using the lockout to force through concessions that will lower living standards, undermine safety, and gut union job security. NIPSCO President Vince Parisi claimed the offer “is one of the strongest proposals in our history.” The company has already announced it will continue operating with “trained non-represented employees, qualified contractors and support from the company’s family of companies.”

According to NIPSCO, its final offer included a 4 percent wage increase for physical and clerical employees, two weeks of paid parental leave and a “stepped approach” to reducing continuous work hours from 32 down to 16. USW officials said there are core attacks on working conditions that the company’s proposal fails to address, including NIPSCO’s demand for expanded use of lower-paid outside contractors, a mandatory overtime acceptance rate and the cutting of continuous work hours.

Union leaders say mandatory overtime quotas and contractor expansion threaten safety, job security and the quality of emergency response.

Hammond’s Democratic Mayor Tom McDermott, Jr. has postured as a friend of the locked out workers. He called on the corporation to end the lockout citing that multiple businesses in the area “have been without power for an entire day,” and several stores have been forced to close. In addition, “several intersections were left without streetlights for that same 30-hour stretch, creating an unnecessary public safety risk on a major corridor.”

While USW officials promote local Democrats, workers are in a struggle against both big business parties and the corporations they defend. Workers are facing a relentless attack on jobs, wages, benefits and social provisions at every level in the US, and old forms of repression are being revived.

South Chicago and northwest Indiana have been particularly hard hit. According to a recent report, employment in northwest Indiana’s primary steel mills has fallen from 65,000 workers at its peak to roughly 9,000 today. Between 1990 and 2017, jobs at Gary Works, ArcelorMittal and Indiana Harbor in Northwest Indiana declined by 58 percent. The industry, which has not seen significant updates to production technology and methods in about 100 years, loses about 500 jobs per year in the region.

Steelworkers’ proud history of struggle stands in the sharpest contrast to this destruction of jobs and productive

infrastructure by the parasitic financial aristocracy.

On Memorial Day in 1937, Chicago police opened fire on unarmed workers demonstrating against Republic Steel in the midst of the “Little Steel” strike of 1937, killing 10 people and wounding dozens more. Most of the workers were shot in the back as they fled. Another 28 were injured by police clubbing, nine of them permanently disabled. The workers, members of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, were demonstrating for recognition of their union which would later become the USW (United Steelworkers).

The USW bureaucracy long ago abandoned these traditions. For decades it has worked as a tool of corporate management overseeing the destruction of workers’ jobs, pensions and working conditions. BP and NIPSCO long ago took the measure of the USW apparatus and are now locking out roughly 2,500 workers in northern Indiana at the same time.

BP and NIPSCO workers can and should form rank-and-file committees, establish lines of communication with steelworkers throughout northwest Indiana and workers across the broader Chicagoland region. Share information about these struggles and prepare coordinated action to defend wages, safety, jobs and the right to strike, up to and including nationwide strike action.

BP and NIPSCO workers—with the support of workers at US Steel’s Gary Works, Cleveland Cliffs, Arcelor and autoworkers at Ford Assembly Stamping, Dakkota, Flex-n-Gate and other USW and UAW facilities—must mobilize independently against this blatant strikebreaking that has been aided and abetted by the USW bureaucracy.



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