“We’re going to have to draw a line in the sand”: Locked-out Martinez refinery workers speak out

Tom Hall, David Benson
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Around 120 members of United Steelworkers Local 5 at Marathon Petroleum’s Martinez, California refinery have been locked out after the company refused their offer to return to work while contract negotiations continued.

The workers went on strike April 27 over chronic understaffing, forced overtime and unsafe conditions, as well as Marathon’s refusal to extend to Martinez the four-year national agreement covering most US refinery workers. In June, the USW offered to return unconditionally and continue bargaining without a contract. Marathon refused to bring the entire workforce back, turning the strike into a lockout.

Workers say Marathon is seeking to eliminate 46 jobs despite staffing studies showing the need for additional operators, while also pushing for more overtime and shorter training periods for new operators.

The attack at Martinez is aimed at further breaking up the national bargaining framework covering roughly 30,000 refinery and petrochemical workers. More than 800 workers at BP’s Whiting, Indiana refinery have also been locked out since March 19 after rejecting a concessions contract by 98.3 percent.

Last August, workers voted for a mandatory National Oil Bargaining Program calling for a 25 percent wage increase over four years, protections against job losses from artificial intelligence and improved healthcare.

Instead, the USW and lead company Marathon reached a pattern agreement in February providing only 15 percent over four years, with no guarantees against job losses from AI. Refinery workers across the country reacted with anger, and many told the WSWS they wanted strike action to enforce the program they had voted for. But outside of the two lockouts, the United Steelworkers has kept refinery workers on the job.

Conditions exist for a far broader struggle. Around 23,000 USW members at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs are working under 30-day contract extensions following the September 1 expiration of their agreements. In Hamilton, Ontario, more than 1,200 National Steel Car workers have been on strike since August 12 against the piecework system and other attacks.

At Martinez, workers said chronic understaffing is at the center of the safety crisis at the plant. Several staffing studies had already established the need for more operators, they said, but the company refused to discuss staffing during bargaining. It later proposed eliminating 46 jobs while demanding still more overtime.

The normal schedule is supposed to be four 12-hour shifts followed by four days off. But two of the four “off” days can be made mandatory workdays.

“Some guys were working 13-in-ones,” one veteran operator said, meaning 13 days straight followed by a single day off. “At the 14th day, the company’s like, ‘Okay, you have to take a day off.’”

Workers said understaffing can force operators to postpone routine rounds and other essential tasks to meet production demands. Operators are responsible for monitoring temperatures, inspecting lines and detecting leaks in a facility where mistakes can have catastrophic consequences.

Marathon is also seeking to reduce the amount of time required to qualify new operators. Workers connected this directly to the November 2023 furnace fire that left operator Jerome Serrano with third-degree burns over more than 80 percent of his body.

“He should still have been training,” one worker said. “Should he even have been out there is the question, right?”

Managers and scabs are operating the facility while experienced unit operators and trained emergency responders remain outside.

“They’ve got the managers in there doing 13-in-ones for four months,” a veteran operator said. “You don’t think they get fatigued? You don’t think they get tired? It’s just a matter of time before they make a mistake and something happens.”

Martinez operators are also part of the mutual-aid emergency response system among Bay Area refineries. “If something happens at a sister refinery down the road, the community is all at risk because we can’t be over there to help.”

Workers increasingly see the company’s objective as breaking their organization and establishing a precedent for future attacks. One said he feared Marathon was “trying to write the playbook on how to break [us] here.”

The offensive is taking place amid enormous corporate profits. Marathon reported $5.1 billion in net income in the second quarter, more than four times the $1.2 billion it made in the same quarter of 2025, and returned $2.8 billion to shareholders. Its refining and marketing earnings soared as refining margins rose sharply.

“We’re out here asking for them to put some money into the safety of this place, for our community and for ourselves,” one operator said. “It’s completely unfair.”

The discussion broadened to the cost-of-living crisis and growing social inequality. One veteran operator said he was poorer in real terms than when he first hired in, despite years of work and enormous amounts of overtime.

“Everything’s gone up. Medical, everything, and wages are not keeping up. And my story is not unique. It’s going across the entire country.”

“We’re working 60-plus hours a week just to try to float, stay ahead,” he added. “At some point, we’re going to have to make a stand as all workers in this country. We need to make a stand that enough is enough.”

He pointed to the growth of the federal debt and the policies pursued since the 2008 financial crash as expressions of a deeper economic crisis. The gross federal debt crossed $40 trillion in August, while the Congressional Budget Office projects federal net interest costs of more than $1 trillion this year.

“On paper, we look richer because we make more dollars,” he said, “but those dollars aren’t buying the same thing as they were just 10, 15 years ago. But it’s the middle class and the workers who are paying the real penalty.”

Workers also connected corporate profits with war. “Whether it’s war or locking us out, only ones getting rich are the ones at the top,” one said.

The National Steel Car strike provides a concrete example of how workers can begin overcoming the isolation of separate struggles. The National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC), founded by shop-floor workers during the 2023 strike, has called for workers to take control of the present struggle and expand it throughout North America.

It has appealed directly to steelworkers in the United States to form their own rank-and-file committees and prepare common action. It has also called on railroad workers in Canada and the United States not to handle NSCX cars that continue generating revenue for National Steel Car during the strike.

Martinez workers responded strongly when WSWS reporters described the NSC struggle.

“I support him. I support him,” one operator said when asked what he would say to a Canadian USW striker. “You have to strike for your rights.”

The discussion turned to the trade war between Washington and Ottawa and the attempt to present workers in different countries as competitors.

Asked whether US and Canadian workers had the same interests, one operator replied, “Yeah. Absolutely. I don’t think we’re enemies or competitors.”

He extended the same point to Mexico. “Everybody just wants to provide for their family and live a good life,” he said. “I don’t think the borders change that in any country.”

These sentiments point to the way forward. The Martinez and Whiting lockouts, the National Steel Car strike and the developing contract battles at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs must be united into a common movement, rather than kept separate by company, industry or national border.

The example of the NSC-RFC shows that the initiative must come from workers themselves. Rank-and-file committees should be built at Martinez, Whiting and throughout the refinery industry to establish direct communication with one another, send delegations to steel plants and other workplaces and prepare coordinated action.

These committees should link up with the NSC-RFC and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to organize the broadest possible fight against job cuts, unsafe conditions, falling living standards, trade war and war.

“Eventually at some point we’re going to have to draw a line in the sand and say no more,” a Martinez worker said. “Maybe that’s what it’s going to take. Everybody coming out together and striking.”