

Defying USW, striking US oil workers continue to resist company demands

By Jerry White
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Despite the deliberate sabotage of their nearly four-month strike by the United Steelworkers union and the AFL-CIO, 1,100 oil workers in Galveston Bay, Texas and another 325 in Toledo, Ohio remain dogged in their resistance to concession demands by the refinery giants.

On Monday night, striking workers at Marathon Petroleum Corp.'s Galveston Bay refinery, near Houston, overwhelmingly rejected the company's latest blackmail proposal, which was brought to them by USW Local 13-1. A cheer rang out in the union hall after 900 workers turned out to vote and defeat the deal, which was worked out by a federal mediator and USW officials.

Local union officials agreed to the vote even though the agreement was the same as the "last, best and final offer" Marathon made in April, which USW Local 13-1 executives rejected without bringing to the membership. The USW was apparently testing the waters to see if the workers had been sufficiently softened up to accept the pro-company deal after the union had shut down all of the remaining local strikes with the exception of Galveston and Toledo.

The proposal was reportedly even more egregious than the national pattern agreement signed by the USW and lead industry negotiator Shell Oil on March 12. That agreement was followed by a systematic campaign by the union to isolate strikers and push through local agreements at 13 of the 15 refineries and petrochemical plants called out by the USW. At the height of the walkout, only 7,000 of the industry's 30,000 USW workers were out, with the majority ordered to continue working and producing profits for the oil conglomerates.

According to striking workers who spoke to the *Houston Chronicle*, Marathon wants to require off-duty employees to wear pagers and report to the refinery within one hour of getting a call. It would "let the company change work schedules at the last minute so employees would be forced to work on their scheduled

days off or be prevented from going home after their shifts ended, the workers said outside the refinery in Texas City as picketing continued," the *Chronicle* reported.

"They're trying to gut the benefits we bargained for," Aaron Maldonado, an operator at the plant, told the newspaper. The proposed pager requirement would make it impossible to take his family away for a short trip, he added.

The company is also reportedly seeking to undo safety provisions put in place after the 2005 explosion at the refinery—then owned by BP—that killed 15 workers and injured another 170. This includes ending the practice of allowing union representatives to respond to safety complaints instead of solely company representatives.

Immediately after the defeat, USW Local 13-1 officials announced that they were willing to resume meetings with Marathon negotiators and the mediator to conclude a new contract. While expressing disappointment with the vote, Marathon spokesman Jamal Kheiry said, "We remain committed to resolving this labor dispute" and "are confident in the abilities of our trained replacement workers to continue to operate the plant successfully, as they have demonstrated over the last 15 weeks."

Refinery workers are already subjected to grueling work schedules and excessive forced overtime, which contributes to fatigue and the high level of accidents in the industry. According to the USW, fires or explosions have occurred every eight days on average since an April 2010 blast at Tesoro's refinery in Anacortes, Washington that claimed the lives of seven workers. Since 2010, at least 27 workers have been killed in accidents at USW-organized refineries.

The highly profitable oil companies have long neglected any significant investments to improve decaying refineries, which are plagued with leaking and corroding pipes and other hazards. At the same time, federal and

state regulators have largely turned a blind eye despite repeated deadly accidents, and the release of toxic gases into surrounding working-class communities. At the same time, the oil giants have squeezed their workforces beyond capacity and increasingly hired lower-paid temporary contractors to replace experienced maintenance workers.

The pattern agreement signed by the USW does nothing to address these issues. Instead, management made meaningless promises to hold “meetings” and “discussions” with the union on staffing levels and fatigue issues.

“A 16-hour workday is commonplace,” Matt, a veteran oil worker on the picket line at the BP-Husky refinery just outside of Toledo, Ohio told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Here BP-Husky is telling us they want to uphold ‘Management Rights’ and get rid of our right to file grievances over safety and other issues. That would be suicide for us. There is no way we can accept that.”

Of the 325 hourly workers who walked out on February 8, Matt said, only 18 have crossed the picket lines and returned to work, despite financial hardships. Many have had to get other jobs to sustain their families, since the USW has provided no strike pay. The USW has kept workers in the dark about negotiations for a new local contract although a bitter turf battle between the USW and building trades unions over the allocation of members and dues money may be a significant issue.

“What are we going to do now?” Matt asked, noting that the company has threatened to post the jobs of striking workers in order to permanently replace them. He added that unionized building trades workers were crossing the picket lines and maintaining production. “We’ve told them they are going to be next if we are defeated.”

Ken, another striker, said, “These companies are making record profits. Prices keep going up but our wages aren’t. I’ve got a brother who was hired two years ago at the Toledo Jeep Plant. He’s making half the wages of the senior workers. The Jeep Wrangler they make sells for \$39,000—that’s more than he makes all year.”

“Who is going to buy the gas, the cars and everything else if workers don’t earn enough to pay for things?” Matt added.

Wedded to the capitalist system, WSWS reporters explained, the USW and other unions have no answer to the relentless attack on workers by the global corporations and instead are only looking for their own share of the profits exploited from the working class.

“We’ve been discussing that at the union hall,” Ken responded, “Some of these union guys on the safety committees and other joint committees have gone on to become part of management. I don’t have all the answers but I’m open to learn.”

The bitter experience of the oil workers’ strike demonstrates once again that the problems facing the working class do not stem from any lack of determination or self-sacrifice on its part. Instead workers face a crisis of political leadership and perspective.

With oil prices falling and the energy giants entirely dependent on their highly profitable refining operations, an industrywide strike by all 30,000 oil workers would have had an immediate and powerful impact. The USW and AFL-CIO, however, opposed such a struggle, fearing it could become a catalyst for a broader movement of American workers against the Obama administration, which has overseen the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression, even as corporate profits and the stock markets hit record highs.

The treachery of the USW underscores the need for new organizations of struggle, controlled by rank-and-file workers and independent of the pro-company unions and the big-business politicians they are allied with. The coming struggles must, above all, be guided by a new political strategy and outlook: the fight for the international unification of the working class against the capitalist profit system.

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