

Detroit Marathon strikers call for support as oil giant ceases healthcare coverage

Jerry White, Dan Coles
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Are you a striking Marathon Detroit Refinery worker? Fill out the form at the end of this article for information on building a rank-and-file strike committee.

Striking Marathon Detroit Refinery workers are calling for support from workers in the auto, steel, trucking and other industries to support their three-month strike against the largest oil refiner in the United States. On Friday, the company plans to cut off healthcare coverage to the approximately 250 workers who have been on strike since September 4.

The company, which made \$9 billion in profits during the first three quarters of the year, is continuing operations at the 150,000 barrels-per-day facility with out-of-town management personnel and contractors. This strikebreaking operation is being protected by the Detroit Police Department, whose cops have been deployed by Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan to escort tanker trucks through the picket lines.

Workers walked out to demand wage improvements to keep up with the high cost of living, to protect their healthcare coverage and to stop the company's use of contractors to eliminate their jobs. The company's negotiators are stonewalling, hoping that the loss of weekly income and the cutoff of medical insurance to workers and their families will force them to surrender and come back on management's terms.

In the face of this provocation, officials from the Teamsters, United Auto Workers, United Steelworkers and other unions have left the Marathon workers isolated, forcing them to fight the giant oil company on their own.

Striking workers, who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the picket line Saturday, appealed to autoworkers facing job cuts in Detroit and Toledo and other sections of workers in the Metro Detroit area to unite with them to fight the corporate attack on jobs and living standards.

A striking refinery operator, who used to work at US Steel, said, "We have to stick together. It reminds me of an Italian immigrant I used to work with. He said when one trade goes on strike the country goes on strike. Look at us, we've been

trying to bargain for a year now, just to get a couple of pennies, and now we're on strike. We're not going to get any movement unless we all stick together.

"We all have to work and provide for our families, the sooner we get together and fight for one another, the sooner we can fix these issues." Such a movement, he said, would have to be initiated by the rank-and-file workers themselves. "That is the only way it is going to work."

This was necessary, the worker said, because of the "oligarchy that we have coming into play next year," referring to the incoming Trump administration and the billionaires and mega-millionaires the fascist president is assembling in his cabinet. "They are all part of the 'F-U, I got mine' club, and they want to cut Social Security, Medicare and other things, and privatize everything.

"It's going to happen. People are going to get together—and stand together. I just hope it happens sooner, rather than later."

Referring to the company's cutoff of medical benefits, another striking worker told the WSWS, "It's not okay that Marathon is cutting off our insurance. It's the least they can do given that we come in here day in and day out, no matter what the weather is, and the job is dangerous. We need our health benefits. The only reason they are doing this is greed. There has to be more equality in our society."

Before calling the strike, Teamsters Local 283 officials kept Marathon workers on the job for eight months after the expiration of their labor agreement on January 31. Workers said they were essentially forced to train the scabs to replace them and make a strike as painless as possible on the company.

Instead of mobilizing the 1.2 million union members in Michigan and Ohio to defend the strikers, Teamsters and UAW officials have brought a host of politicians from Bernie Sanders, Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib and Democratic City Council members from Detroit to the picket lines for photo ops.

UAW President Shawn Fain also made an appearance last month even though the UAW bureaucracy has done nothing

to even inform rank-and-file autoworkers about the three-month strike. At the same time, UAW Local 600 officials at the nearby Ford Rouge Complex sent a letter to the Teamsters Local 283 promoting a toothless consumer boycott of Marathon and Speedway gas stations.

“All these politicians showing up, it’s nothing but rah-rah,” a striking worker told the WSWs. “The media isn’t covering our strike unless a politician shows up. Now, they are cutting off our insurance, and there is no way people can afford to get COBRA (a temporary continuation of benefits under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, which workers must pay out of pocket). Their goal is to hurt us and get more guys to cross the picket line.”

Another worker added, “I don’t know how anyone could afford it,” referring to COBRA. Referring to the dangers refinery and other industrial workers face, he said, “I used to work at US Steel on Zug Island before it closed. Every year a guy died in there. When I first got here, Marathon went above and beyond about training and safety. But ever since Marathon merged with Andeavor in 2018, it seems Marathon has adapted their practices, and safety has gone down.”

The worker added that many of the Teamsters Local 283 officials who had negotiated the last contract had gotten management positions in the refinery.

Form rank-and-file committees to expand the strike!

If the strike is not to be defeated, Marathon workers will have to organize a rank-and-file strike committee, made up of the most trusted and class-conscious workers, to transfer decision-making and power from the union apparatus to the refinery workers themselves. The committee should demand a mass membership meeting to outline workers’ non-negotiable demands, end all closed-door negotiations with management and federal mediators, and demand that the national Teamsters union provide medical coverage out of its more than half a billion dollars in assets.

Rank-and-file strikers should appeal to Ford and Cleveland Cliffs workers at the Rouge Complex, the US Steel mill in Ecorse, Stellantis workers in Detroit and Toledo, railroad workers and Teamsters truck drivers and warehouse workers at UPS and other logistics companies to hold joint protests and other collective action to defeat Marathon’s strikebreaking.

A special appeal should be made to refinery and petrochemical workers in Ohio, Minnesota, Texas and other states for joint action, along with the 55,000 Canada Post

workers striking across the Detroit River in Canada.

Another worker referred to the September 2022 explosion and fire at the BP Husky refinery, about 60 miles to the south near Toledo, which killed two brothers, Ben and Max Morrissey. “I remember when that was announced, I tried so hard not to cry. It’s heartbreaking. Imagine being on the job and you are killed. For what? This industry is so rough, they try to make you numb to the issues going on around you.

“That’s what a lot of us at Marathon have been discussing. We understand it’s a very unsafe environment, working with the material and instruments. When you work so many long hours, it’s a disaster waiting to happen. Marathon is making these managers work 14 days straight during our strike. We don’t want them to get hurt or killed—we’re fighting the corporation, not individual managers or contractors. But we understand the responsibility we have when we go to work because a lot of us live in the nearby community and understand people have families who would be injured if anything tragic happened.”

Another striking worker told the WSWs, “This kind of work takes a toll on your body. You’re outside in the cold and the heat. You’re doing heavy work. There’s supposed to be a certain number of workers to run a refinery safely, along with limits on who how long we work. According to the contract, after working seven days straight, you have to be paid double time on the eighth day. But they set the schedule from mid-week to mid-week, so they can claim we did not work seven days in a row. It’s a scam, but that way they can force you to work overtime without paying for it.

“When COVID first hit, they told us we were ‘essential workers’ and had to come in. They even make operators sign up to be on call for a certain number of days a year. They tell us, we have to come in because things could explode. Of course, we want to protect the neighborhood, but when you’re exhausted that’s dangerous too.”

To get more information about building a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.



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