

Teamsters force through sellout deal at Detroit Marathon refinery after snap vote

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Striking Marathon refinery workers in Detroit have ratified a new seven-year agreement after the Teamsters called a snap vote on 48-hours' notice. The shutdown of the more than three-month walkout follows the move by management to cut off health insurance for the 250 striking workers.

The contract settlement represents a betrayal of the demands of strikers, who had held firm against a full scale strikebreaking operation by management, which imported scabs from out of state protected by Detroit cops sent by Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan.

While the Teamsters leadership called the deal a “strong” contract, the reported 24 percent wage increase does not make up for past price rises. Spread over an outrageously protracted seven-years, the deal locks in a major reduction in workers' standard of living. The agreement reportedly abandoned workers' main demand for serious protections against the threat of subcontracting their jobs.

A young worker told the WSWs, “We are angry that the union only gave us 48 hours to vote and we didn't get enough time to read the whole contract. We heard it only passed by five votes. I voted to reject it and so did a lot of the younger workers who are really getting screwed. It went from a four-year contract to seven years. The company was rushing this to get us back to work before the holidays. We're supposed to be back Tuesday.”

Another, more senior worker said, “I blame the Teamsters bureaucracy and the corporatism between the Teamsters and the company. I think they forced it on the workers to avoid anger over the ending of healthcare benefits and the possibility of (the union) having to provide funds to workers for insurance or healthcare costs.

“The fact that the union went along with this makes me very upset. We weren't given enough time to think about the consequences of the new contract. No one has been able to read the whole contract; almost none of the workers have ever read through the expired contract.”

The Teamsters bureaucracy did nothing to mobilize support from other refinery workers or the hundreds of thousands of industrial and logistics workers in the Detroit

area, including tens of thousands of members of the United Auto Workers and Teamsters. This left the Detroit Marathon workers on their own battling the largest oil refiner in the US, which pulled in \$9 billion in profits during the first three quarters of 2024.

Speaking of the cutoff of health insurance by the company, the young worker said, “They were counting on us being burned out and pressured us by cutting off our insurance. The more senior workers were at their wits end, and didn't think we were going to get anything better.”

He expressed anger at both Teamsters and management over the deal. “We stood out there for three months and got the same thing they offered us from the beginning. A seven-year contract is ridiculous—nothing in this economy is assured. We didn't get any more sick time, or vacation time, and the language on subcontracting is the same as the old contract.”

His senior coworker added, “I heard the wage increase was 25 percent over seven years. The Federal Reserve has a two to three percent target for inflation annually, but that's under ideal conditions. Now, it's been much higher than that. The annual increase for wages under the new contract would be way below inflation. We work to gain experience and pass that on to new workers. People should be rewarded for that. The contract should provide an increase to meet inflation and compensate us for our retention and experience.”

Following the expiration of the previous contract on January 31, 2024, the Teamsters kept workers on the job until September. It was the first strike at the refinery in 30 years. Workers said that during the extended contract negotiations they were essentially forced to train the workers that replaced them during the strike.

The Detroit Marathon refinery is a notorious polluter, with local residents fighting a decades-long battle for compensation and relief. While the refinery has been fined many times for violating state air quality standards, the token fines have been more than offset by tax breaks from the state.

The senior worker said, “Every OSHA (Occupational

Safety and Health Administration) policy and refinery policy requires a given number of gallons spilled before the refinery has to report it, so the management often intentionally underestimates amounts. OSHA gave them a month to clean up the refinery before a safety visit, and the company knew the exact day OSHA planned to visit. The management can steer and direct them exactly where they want,” he said.

“The pollution in the refinery’s zip code is coming, in large part, from the Detroit refinery’s sewer system. It’s full of toxic fumes, oil and chemicals that are seeping into the groundwater. Because of some regulations, they’re dumping a lot less, but what’s already in the sewer system is the problem. When you hear about someone retiring, a year or two later, you hear about them getting cancer or dying from it.”

The contempt with which management treats working class residents of Detroit is only matched by its mistreatment of workers.

Workers are forced to labor under unsafe and grueling 12-hour shifts in an environment loaded with safety hazards. Workers in Detroit were well familiar with the September 2022 explosion and fire at the BP Husky refinery, about 60 miles to the south near Toledo. Two brothers, Ben and Max Morrissey, died in the incident. A report released earlier this year by the US Chemical Safety Board stated the tragedy was entirely preventable and would have never happened except for management neglect.

The experience of Detroit Marathon workers under the Teamsters are similar to those of other US oil refinery workers. In 2022, on the eve of the Ukraine war, the United Steelworkers ignored an overwhelming strike vote and imposed a 4-year contract on 30,000 oil refinery workers at Marathon, Chevron and other major energy corporations. The deal included a miniscule 2.5 percent pay raise the first year and three percent in subsequent years, guaranteeing continued gargantuan profits for the oil giants.

Rather than seeking to mobilize support from the working class, the Teamsters invited a host of Democratic politicians to the picket line to posture as supporters of the strike. This included Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and Detroit Democratic Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib as well as members of the Detroit City Council.

Among those also making an appearance was United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain, who has kept UAW members completely ignorant of the strike. UAW Local 600, meanwhile, launched a symbolic and toothless consumer boycott of Marathon.

All of this “support,” from big business politicians who receive millions in corporate donations, predictably had zero effect in breaking the isolation of the strike or pushing back

against management union busting.

The younger worker said that the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* during the course of the strike about the role of the Teamsters apparatus had proved correct.

“The WSWs warned us that the union would do this. At the union’s informational meeting workers brought up that nothing had changed in the offer but getting an extra one percent. We thought that the vote would be 50-50 but they said it passed. The union officials brought out their people to pressure us to vote for this. They were saying ‘they’re going to replace us.’ But they had three months to do this and they were begging us to come back. There were accusations that stewards were hiding information from the workers. They were floating rumors that strike pay would be cut off.

“We were disappointed and we have to learn the lessons about this strike. We were left to fight this giant corporation on our own. All we want is to be paid a livable wage.”

Referring to the fight ahead, he added, “Now Trump is planning to deport immigrants and Musk is denouncing homeless people. We want to take what we learned to help other workers.”

The primary lesson workers must draw is the need for independent rank and file organization to transfer power from the Teamster apparatus to workers on the shop floor. These committees should forge links with workers at other refineries and industries through building and expanding the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees.

Are you a refinery worker? Tell us about the conditions at your workplace.



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