



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Oil Workers strike for improved wages and working conditions, 2015

1 February

2015

to: 12 March

2015

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Torrance, California

Location Description: Refineries in 19 cities across the United States

Goals:

employers stop hiring non-union workers, add safety measures, and improve wages and healthcare.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Environment

Group characterization:

- Environmentalists
- USW Oilworker union members
- local community members

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

United Steelworkers Union

External allies:

Louisiana Bucket Brigade, the Sierra Club, Communities for a Better Environment, and Labor Network for Sustainability

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- United Steelworkers Union

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Communities for a Better Environment
- Louisiana Bucket Brigade
- and Labor Network for Sustainability
- the Sierra Club

Groups in 3rd Segment:**Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:**

Segment Length: 6 days and 16 hours

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Shell Oil, which negotiated on behalf of the other refinery companies.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

The United Steelworkers (USW) strikes came after decades of cordial relations between the USW-affiliated unions and the national oil companies. However, between the previous agreement between the USW and employers in 2012 and February 2015, refiners' shares more than doubled. Meanwhile, workers' wages and benefits remained stagnant.

Moreover, falling oil prices in the final months of 2014 caused oil refiners to attempt to cut costs, prompting safety concerns among workers and the communities around the oil refineries. Companies contracted non-union workers with less training for lower wages than their union counterparts while also cutting the number of staff. These changes forced workers already working 12-hour shifts to take on more overtime. In further cost-cutting attempts, companies weakened safety measures. The USW union said that overtime, fatigue, and hiring of non-union workers without training were exacerbating risks of mistakes, which could lead to deadly accidents affecting workers and the communities around the refineries.

During January 2015, the USW attempted to reach an agreement with employers on a new contract that would stop cuts in staff, provide better healthcare for workers, and stop the hiring of non-union contract workers. After failing to reach an agreement with employers, the USW began a strike on 1 February at nine refineries in California, Kentucky, Texas and Washington. These nine refineries combined made up 10 percent of U.S. refining capacity, making the strike the largest refinery strike in over 30 years. Workers at all other USW-operated sites continued to work under 24-hour contract extensions.

In addition to the strike, the workers and supporters led guerilla film screenings and daily rallies at the refineries and around the country at refinery operators' headquarters. A group of workers travelled to Europe and partnered with the British union UNITE and Divest London to demonstrate outside a venue where Shell CEO Ben van Buerden delivered a speech in London. After ExxonMobil continued to refuse to respond to questions about the health impacts of an explosion in February at the Torrance, California refinery, the USW Local 675 delivered a pile of horse manure to ExxonMobil office.

Within a week, the strike had slight effects on the production. Companies brought in non-union workers to replace striking workers and prevent production shortfalls that threatened to create declines in profit. Nevertheless, gasoline prices slightly rose as a result of the

strike.

On 8 February, one week into the strike, the USW expanded the strike to two more refineries in Ohio, involving 1,440 more workers and 13 percent of United States oil refining capacity. As Shell and the other refinery companies Shell represented in the negotiations continued to resist, more workers joined the strike. By early March, 7000 workers were on strike, affecting 19 refineries including nation's largest refinery in Port Arthur, Texas.

The USW workers emphasized collaboration with the local community, recognizing that worker safety was closely connected to community safety. Environmental and climate groups including the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, the Sierra Club, Communities for a Better Environment, and Labor Network for Sustainability, joined picketing union members. An accidental explosion at ExxonMobil's Torrance, California refinery on 18 February that shattered windows, damaged buildings, and injured four workers underscored health and safety concerns among workers and community members.

As the employers refused to accede to workers' demands, frustration among unions grew, and the 13-1 local USW union, which represented workers striking at Shell's Deer Park, Texas Refinery, organized a march with several hundred workers on 6 March in an attempt to meet with Shell negotiators who had ceased negotiations with USW two weeks before. The workers attempted to enter Shell's headquarters, but police blocked them.

After six-weeks of failed negotiations, the USW came to a national agreement with employers on 12 March, 2015 after three consecutive days of meetings. The employers refused to agree to any proposal that involved wage hikes, but accepted modest wage gains in line with rises in cost of living. Moreover, the agreement called for the involvement of USW personnel in the review of staffing, workload assessments, and daily maintenance at plants. In order to appease USW concerns over untrained and non-union workers taking union jobs, the employers agreed to develop hiring plans "in conjunction with recruitment and training programs." The National Oil Bargaining Policy Committee, a rank-and-file union group, unanimously supported the agreement, though some local plants and unions continued negotiations after the national employers and unions reached an agreement.

Research Notes

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