Union extends talks with Marathon, averting strike at refineries

HOUSTON — The United Steelworkers (USW) union said late on Saturday it would extend talks with Marathon Petroleum Corp. (MPC), averting a strike by 30,000 workers at US refineries and chemical plants.

The rolling 24-hour extension means the current contract, which had been set to expire at 12:01 a.m. ET (0501 GMT) on Sunday, remains in effect until either the union gives a 24-hour notice to strike or Marathon issues a 24-hour notice to lock workers out.

Since negotiations began a little over a week ago, the union has rejected at least five proposals from Marathon. The last proposal on Saturday would have given refinery and chemical plant workers a 14% wage increase over a four-year contract.

Marathon is the lead negotiator for 26 US refiners and chemical companies, including Exxon Mobil, Chevron and Valero Energy. The USW represents workers at plants that account for two-thirds of US crude oil refining capacity.

Earlier on Saturday, Marathon spokesperson Jamal Kheiry said, "MPC continues to meet with representatives from the USW. We are committed to bargaining in good faith and to working toward a mutually satisfactory agreement."

Mike Smith, chairman of the Steelworkers' National Oil Bargaining Program, said union members were fighting for fairness and justice.

"Our unity and solidarity at every facility throughout the industry sends a clear message that we are prepared to fight for a fair contract," Mr. Smith said in a statement issued by the USW.

Sticking points for the talks are cost-of-living increases for the 30,000 oil industry workers represented by the union, healthcare costs and standards for use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the plants, said people familiar with the talks.

The USW is also pushing for tougher safety standards, but the sources said that seems to be a nonstarter for Marathon.

"Marathon as a company thinks our industry is overpaid," said one of the sources, who asked not to be identified because they were not authorized to speak publicly. "They're not coming up much on economics. And to be honest, they're not really addressing anything else in our proposal besides AI. And they're not addressing it in a good way."

In previous negotiations, the USW has granted 24-hour extensions for several days past a contract's expiration.

The negotiations are for a national pattern agreement that sets wages for the hourly union workers, healthcare costs, national agreements on safety and other issues.

Inside refinery operators make about $50 an hour after completing their probationary period.

The national agreement is combined with agreements on site-specific issues to create the contract for each plant.

Workers and the company settled local issues on Friday at Marathon's largest refinery, the 631,000 barrel-per-day Galveston Bay Refinery. — ***Reuters***

India allows foreign firms to fund equipment without tax risk

NEW DELHI — India's government on Sunday handed a major win to Apple by allowing foreign companies to provide machines to their contract manufacturers in certain areas for five years without any tax risk.

Apple has been growing in India in recent years as it diversifies beyond China. Counterpoint Research says iPhone's share of the Indian market has doubled to 8% since 2022. And while China still accounts for 75% of global iPhone shipments, India's share has quadrupled to 25% since 2022.

Apple had been lobbying India's government to modify its income tax laws to ensure the company is not taxed for ownership of the high-end iPhone machinery it provides to its contract manufacturers.

In India, unlike China, Apple was concerned that if it paid for machines for its contract manufacturers, Indian law could consider that a so-called "business connection" and impose taxes on its iPhone sales profits. That had forced its contract manufacturers Foxconn and Tata to themselves spend billions of dollars on machines.

India on Sunday said that "to promote manufacturing of electronic goods for a contract manufacturer," it is making certain law changes to ensure that mere ownership of machines by a foreign company does not lead to taxes on it.

The decision was made public as part of Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's 2026-27 annual budget, presented on Sunday.

The move could prompt Apple and other companies to invest rapidly in the electronics manufacturing space by taking over initial expenses for pricey machines, reducing the initial cost burden on contract manufacturers they partner with.

"We are saying that if you bring your machine, and that machine is used by a local manufacturer to produce something, we will... exempt you for 5 years. We are giving them certainty," Revenue Secretary Arvind Shrivastava said at a post-budget press conference.

FASTER SCALE-UP AND GREATER CONFIDENCE

Smartphone manufacturing is a key plank of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's agenda for economic growth.

The rule change will apply until the 2030-31 tax year and only to factories set up in so-called customs-bonded areas — which are technically considered being outside India's customs border. If devices are sold within India from such factories, they will attract import taxes, making such facilities attractive only for exports.

"Any income arising on account of providing capital goods, equipment or tooling to a contract manufacturer, being a company resident in India, is eligible for exemption," the Indian government said in one of its explanatory budget documents.

Apple did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"This exemption removes a key deal-breaking risk for electronics manufacturing in India," said Shankey Agrawal, a partner at Indian tax-focussed law firm BMR Legal. "The result is faster scale-up and greater confidence for global electronics players to manufacture in India."

Apple held many discussions with Indian officials in recent months to tweak the law as it feared the legislation could hamper its future growth, Reuters has reported.

The earlier rules did not affect Apple's South Korean rival Samsung as almost all of its phones are made in its own Indian factories, and not by contract manufacturers. — ***Reuters***

India gives 20-year tax holiday to foreign firms using local data centers

NEW DELHI — India said on Sunday foreign companies using data centers built in the country to provide services to global clients will not face any taxes for doing so for more than 20 years, hoping to assuage concerns of possible tax liabilities on the sector.

Scores of data centers have been built in India in recent years, but lawyers told Reuters that foreign companies had been concerned that New Delhi could in future impose taxes on their global income for using a data center located in the country.

Those concerns were set to rest by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her 2026-27 budget speech, where she said India will "provide (a) tax holiday till 2047 to any foreign companies that provide cloud services to their customers globally, by using data center services from India."

Vaibhav Gupta, partner at tax firm Dhruva Advisors, said: "This announcement helps in bringing clarity to foreign companies and lends stability in (their) tax position in India till 2047," noting foreign companies would no longer need to worry about potential taxes on their global income on the basis they use a data center in India.

Google said in October it will invest $15 billion in an artificial intelligence data center project in Andhra Pradesh state, while Microsoft and Amazon have poured billions into data centers in India. Indian conglomerates like Adani and Reliance are also investing.

Amazon, Microsoft and Google did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the government's tax measure.

"Data centers will be a major strength for India through which we can provide new services to the world," Information Technology Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told reporters. — ***Reuters***

Philippines seeks World Bank funding for water, solid waste projects

THE PHILIPPINES is seeking funding from the World Bank for a water, sanitation, and solid waste management project, the bank said.

The Philippines Accelerated Water and Sanitation Project is targeted for approval by the bank's board on March 30, according to a document uploaded to the bank's website on Feb. 2.

The project cost is $268.84 million, with the departments of Public Works and Highways and Interior and Local Government (DILG) serving as implementing agencies.

The project hopes "to increase access to safely managed water supply and sanitation services and improve the performance of water service providers in selected areas of the Philippines," the World Bank said.

In a separate report, the Philippines is also aiming to obtain a $1.07-billion loan from the World Bank to improve waste management and reduce plastic pollution in the National Capital Region.

The Clean Metro Manila project is estimated to be approved by the board in November with the project cost estimated at $1.07 billion, the bank said in a Jan. 30 report.

Implementing agencies are the DILG, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, and the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority.

"The first phase of Clean Philippines multiphase programmatic approach will cover Metro Manila, the National Capital Region (NCR), including all of its 17 LGUs (local government units)," it said.

The NCR encompasses 17 LGUs and 1,710 barangays, with 14 million inhabitants.

Solid waste volumes are expected to reach P23.6 million tons by 2025, particularly organic waste and plastics, the bank said, noting poor waste-disposal practices, declining waste-management capacity, and limited plastic-processing capacity.

"Barangays are responsible for solid waste collection but are constrained by the lack of funds and collection trucks," the World Bank said. — **Aubrey Rose A. Inosante**

PHL fish catch declining 45,000 MT a year due to overfishing, lax regulation — report

THE Philippine fish catch is declining by an average of 45,000 metric tons (MT) each year due to overfishing, illegal fishing, and weak enforcement of fisheries law, according to Oceana Philippines.

In a report, Oceana Philippines said capture fisheries production fell from 2.6 million MT in 2010 to about 1.9 million MT in 2023, representing an annual loss of 45,472 MT.

"Our fisheries are not just declining, they are in freefall. We've lost nearly 600,000 MT of potential catch in just over a decade. That's enough fish to provide a healthy meal to every Filipino for a month," Von Glenn S. Hernandez, vice-president of Oceana Philippines, said at the report's launch on Monday.

The report found that 88% of assessed fish stocks are being harvested faster than they can recover, indicating severe exploitation across most commercially important species.

"Some evidence suggests localized stock recovery in areas such as the Davao Gulf and Zamboanga Peninsula. However, scientific data show many fish populations remain overfished even after years of seasonal closures," the report said.

The continued depletion of fish stocks poses a serious threat to national food security, the report said. Fish account for 11.7% of the country's total food requirement.

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing also resulted in an estimated P5.4 billion in losses from 2022 to 2023, which the organization described as economic value "stolen from the sector."

The group said unregulated fishing and declining fish stocks are exacerbating poverty in coastal communities. In 2023, an estimated 353,000 fisherfolk families were living below the poverty line, including about 93,000 families classified as food-poor or unable to afford basic food needs.


PHILIPPINE STAR/NOEL PABALATE

Oceana urged the government to take immediate action by strengthening enforcement of Republic Act (RA) No. 10654, or the amended Philippine Fisheries Code, to curb illegal fishing and ensure the long-term sustainability of the country's fisheries.

Under the amended Fisheries Code, only municipal fisherfolk — those operating boats weighing less than 3.1 gross tons and employing non-destructive, passive fishing practices such as hook-and-line and gill nets — are allowed to fish within municipal waters. These waters extend up to 15 kilometers from the coastline, including offshore islands.

However, Oceana said only 51% of coastal local government units (LGUs) have complete municipal water delineation.

Data cited in the report also showed that more than 270,000 cases of "apparent intrusions" by commercial fishing vessels into municipal waters were recorded between January 2017 and January 2024.

While Fisheries Administrative Order No. 266 was issued in 2020 to require vessel monitoring measures (VMM) for commercial fishing vessels, Oceana said enforcement gaps have allowed unchecked operations and unverified catch reports to persist.

"The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) has not fully utilized the system despite about 90% of commercial vessels (being equipped) with VMM devices as of 2024," the report said.

Section 18 of the Fisheries Code allows commercial fishing within the 10.1- to 15-kilometer zone of municipal waters, subject to strict conditions, including certification from the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority and the conduct of public hearings.

However, Oceana noted that only one of the 174 coastal LGUs authorizing commercial fishing in municipal waters has complied with all required conditions.

The report also cited staffing and budget constraints at BFAR, noting a 28% drop in personnel from 2017 to 2023, with about 68% of current staff employed on a contractual basis. BFAR also receives only 6% to 15% of the Department of Agriculture's (DA) budget.

"The challenge is so big relative to the resources available. These declines (in staff and resources) happened despite the expanded mandate of BFAR under RA 10654," according to Alice Joan G. Ferrer, executive director of Too Big to Ignore Philippines and one of the report's authors, said at the launch.

Oceana called on the government to strengthen enforcement in hotspot areas, expand BFAR's workforce and budget, resolve legal impediments to vessel monitoring, and complete municipal water delineation, prioritizing regions with high intrusion rates.

"We will be sharing the report and our demands with the DA and BFAR. The fisheries crisis has been happening under the radar. Hopefully, they take notice and respond with urgency," Mr. Hernandez told reporters. —**Vonn Andrei E. Villamiel**

Market-vendor QR system present in over 900 LGUs at end of 2025

THE NUMBER of local government units (LGUs) that have integrated a central bank-backed quick response (QR) code program for public market vendors more than doubled last year, according to the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP).

BSP Deputy Governor Bernadette Romulo-Puyat said 922 LGUs had adopted the Paleng-QR Ph Plus in 2025, more than doubling the year-earlier total.

"From 408 local government units in 2024, we now have more than 900 LGUs that have adopted the program, covering markets, mall stores, and transport hubs nationwide," she said at a briefing in Dumaguete City.

By 2026, the BSP aims to grow the number to 1,700 LGUs, Ms. Romulo-Puyat said, not counting barangays.

She also noted that the Department of Information and Communications Technology has been tapped to broaden the program's reach.

Ms. Romulo-Puyat said Information and Communications Technology Secretary Henry Rhoel R. Aguda will assist the central bank by supplying internet connectivity to unconnected markets.

"Secretary Aguda told us to write down *kung saan 'yung mga palengke na walang* internet connectivity, *at bibigyan niya ng* Starlink (Secretary Aguda told us to list the markets without internet connectivity and he will give them Starlink)," she said. — **Katherine K. Chan**