

Boron struggle betrayed

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In the California mining town of Boron, hundreds of miners returned to work last week after a three-and-a-half-month lockout by the Rio Tinto group, the multinational conglomerate that owns the borate mine. The contract, while being hailed as a victory by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and its middle class “left” supporters, contains major concessions and will make already miserable conditions for Boron miners that much more intolerable.

Five hundred and seventy Boron miners were locked out of the mine on January 31, 2010, after workers refused to agree to the terms of a contract presented by Rio Tinto, the third largest mining company in the world. The company justified the contract—which would have eliminated pensions, reduced wages, and introduced labor “flexibility”—by arguing that global competition was forcing their hand. This despite the fact that the company controls mining interests on five continents and raked in \$58 billion in sales and \$16 billion in profits in 2008.

Rio Tinto is notorious for its record of brutal attacks on its workers. The group takes its name from the Rio Tinto (Red River) in Spain, where it supported fascist dictator Francisco Franco in his efforts to crush republicans during the Spanish Civil War. Since then, Rio Tinto has repeatedly aligned itself with dictatorial regimes, including Suharto in Indonesia and Pinochet in Chile.

On May 15, the ILWU Local 30 came to an agreement with Rio Tinto, putting an end to the lockout. The contract was passed by a 3-to-1 margin. Under the terms of the new contract, workers will receive a 2.5 percent-a-year pay increase for the next seven years—a de facto pay freeze, given the current rate of inflation and possible wage cuts in future years. For new hires, company-paid pensions will be replaced

with employee-funded 401(k) plans with a 4 percent company contribution. Annual sick days have been reduced by nearly a third, from 14 to 10.

The company said it won the right to base promotions and transfers on skills and performance rather than just seniority, to settle disputes through grievance and arbitration and to use contract workers during busy periods. “We have reached a fair agreement that allows us to improve work practices and productivity so we can keep the business competitive throughout the life of the operation, potentially another 70 years,” General Manager of Boron Operations Dean Gehring said in a statement.

Such a miserable outcome was the result of the isolation and betrayal of the struggle by the ILWU and AFL-CIO. Despite popular support for the miners in the area and nearby Los Angeles and mounting opposition to the draconian budget cuts being imposed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the ILWU and AFL-CIO did everything to block a unified struggle by the working class throughout the state. Nor was anything done to shut down Rio Tinto’s international operations of the British-Australian conglomerate. Instead, the unions promoted illusions in the Democratic Party, conducted toothless appeals to the company’s shareholder meetings and held American nationalist protests at the British consulate.

Although workers sought to prevent it, the company continued to operate the mine throughout the lockout with scabs and management personnel backed by local police, sheriff’s deputies, helicopters and judges.

The ILWU immediately hailed the deal as a great victory, with a press statement, released May 17, saying, “Workers win their fight against Rio Tinto’s lockout in Boron.”

This lie was repeated by various middle class “left” apologists for the trade union apparatus, such as the Labor Notes organization, which presented the deal as

unmitigated triumph. An article by another such outfit, the International Socialist Organization, entitled, “Boron strike ends with ILWU victory,” lavishes praise on the union and the contract. “The victorious outcome,” says the ISO publication, “spoke volumes about what’s possible, even during an economic crisis, when workers take a stand.”

During the course of the lockout, workers and their families demonstrated enormous capacity for self-sacrifice and struggle. However, the three-and-a-half-month struggle was betrayed by the ILWU and other unions, which are indelibly tied to the corporations, through various “labor-management partnerships” and to the big business Democratic Party.

The precondition for any serious struggle in defense of jobs and living standards is an organizational and political break with these outmoded organizations and the building of new forms of independent struggle by the working class. These must be based on the fight for the international unity of all workers and the transformation of global conglomerates like Rio Tinto into publicly owned utilities, under the control of the working class.



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