

2,000 Asarco mineworkers go on strike in Arizona and Texas

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Two thousand copper miners have gone on strike in Arizona and Texas, joining a growing wave of struggles by workers to regain massive concessions granted to the corporations and Wall Street in the past decades.

On Friday, workers at five Asarco locations in Arizona and Texas voted overwhelmingly to reject the company's "last and final offer." The company is demanding that workers, who have not had a pay raise in 11 years, accept a pay freeze. Due to inflation, workers would need a nearly 20 percent raise just to recover lost wages, let alone make up for the wages they have lost.

The company is also demanding a freeze on all existing pension plans and cuts to health benefits, including a doubling of out-of-pocket expenses that workers currently pay. Additionally, the company has refused to pay more than \$10 million in bonuses owed to workers hired since 2014, despite being ordered to do so by an arbitrator and in several court rulings.

Striking copper miners join about 48,000 autoworkers on strike against General Motors and 3,500 workers on strike against truck maker Mack-Volvo, who also went on strike Sunday.

The strike is part of a growing international movement, which includes miners throughout the world. Earlier this year, copper miners in Chile struck against one of the world's largest producers of copper, the Chuquibambilla mine, and workers at Chile's Antofagasta mine in the Antucoya deposit in northern Chile have rejected the company's last offer and are preparing to strike. Workers at the Blackjewel mine in Kentucky took a courageous stand against the corporation, demanding back pay by blocking movement of coal cars after the company went bankrupt.

Asarco is part of the Mexican conglomerate Grupo Mexico, the third largest copper producer in the world through its stake in Asarco, and the largest mining company in Mexico. In Arizona, the company operates mines in Sahuarita and Marana, and a mine and smelter in Central Arizona. Its three largest open-pit mines are the Silver Bell, Ray and Mission mines in Arizona; altogether its mines

produce a total of 350,000,000 to 400,000,000 pounds of copper per year.

Asarco filed for bankruptcy in 2005, in part to rid the company of over \$1 billion in claims from poisoning miners with asbestos and other environmental damage. Grupo Mexico regained control of the company following bankruptcy in 2009.

Workers at the mines belong to nine different unions, with the United Steelworkers (USW) representing the majority of the workers and leading the negotiations. Workers have been without a new contract since November 2018, when their previous 14-month contract expired. Since then they have been working under the terms of an extended contract. On Friday, the unions gave Asarco a 48-hour notice that they were terminating the extended contract.

Workers are employed for 12-hour shifts and are subject to unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Copper smelting releases massive amounts of toxic and cancer-causing chemicals. The company has 20 heavily polluted superfund sites throughout the US and has been the target of significant litigation due to its pollution of the environment.

Asarco has also refused to install many safety procedures, including view cameras on the massive trucks used to move the mined rocks. These trucks are so massive that the driver in the cab cannot see a person standing less than 35 feet in front of the truck, and has almost no view of the sides or behind the vehicles.

However, the United Steelworkers and the other unions involved have no intention of opposing these appalling conditions or fighting for decent living, health care and safe working conditions. They have agreed to all the concessions demanded by Asarco and the other copper companies over a period of decades.

The USW hopes to bring the strike to a quick end. It has called the strike not to fight for a decent contract for its members, but under the claim that Asarco is conducting "unfair labor practices" and is in violation of the National Labor Relations Act.

Following the example of the Communication Workers of

America in the recent strike against AT&T in the Southeast, the USW will try to call off the strike as soon as possible without any of the issues being resolved, on the pretext that Asarco is now willing to bargain in “good faith.”

United Steelworkers District 12 Director Robert LaVenture has said that the USW is willing to resume bargaining with the company and to meet as long as necessary to reach a contract. He stated, “We cannot allow ASARCO managers—even when directed by Grupo executives in Mexico City—to pick and choose which U.S. labor laws and standards apply to them, and the company can’t expect to roll back generations of collective bargaining progress without a fight.”

The reference to “Grupo executives in Mexico City,” is meant to appeal to chauvinism and nationalism. The USW seeks to pit workers in the United States against workers in Mexico, as if to imply that if only Asarco was an American firm it would then have an interest in treating its workers in the US with fairness.

This is in line with the nationalism promoted by the United Steelworkers. The USW has been among the strongest backers of Trump’s trade war measures, only disagreeing that they have not gone far enough.

During the bitter 1983-84 strike against Phelps Dodge in Morenci, Arizona, the USW worked to isolate the striking copper miners while Democratic Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt brought in the National Guard and state police to escort scabs across the picket line. One Phelps Dodge demand was that workers give up the annual cost of living wage increase and replace it with a yearly bonus pegged to the price of copper.

The isolation and defeat of the Phelps Dodge miners was part of a process set in motion with the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers strike, in which the unions—including the USW and the Teamsters—deliberately worked to isolate and defeat the strikers in order to prove that they were a trusted partner of the corporations in their drive to cut costs in the name of allowing the companies to more successfully compete on the world market. The list of strikes betrayed and defeated in the 1980s includes the Hormel meat packers, Greyhound bus drivers, and strikes by workers at International Paper and US Steel.

Workers at Asarco are determined to fight back, like their brothers and sisters at General Motors and other sections of workers around the world. They must learn from the lessons of the past decades, which demonstrate that strikes cannot be won if they stay within the straitjacket imposed by the unions. Workers must take the initiative to link their fight under an independent banner and program based on their needs as a class.

Last year, the USW isolated workers at US Steel and

ArcelorMittal, refusing to call a strike after a unanimous vote, pushing through a concessions contract with a pitiful wage increase that did not cover the wages lost by workers under a three-year pay freeze and containing no guarantees against further layoffs.

Earlier this year, the USW pushed through a concessions contract after it kept 30,000 oilworkers in the dark about negotiations. The resulting deal included a wage raise that barely kept pace with the rate of inflation. In each of these betrayals, the USW acceded to the company demands to continue the erosion of health and safety protections for workers.

Meanwhile, successive Democratic and Republican administrations have allowed the mining companies to ride roughshod over the health and lives of mineworkers, stripping away funding from the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and appointing pro-corporate heads to the organization.

There is more than enough money in the coffers of the mining giants like Asarco and in the bank accounts of its shareholders, the global banks and stock exchanges, to meet workers’ demands. However, if workers leave the conduct of their fight in the hands of the USW and other unions they will be told that they must settle for what the corporations offer in the face of a global dip in copper prices, amid trade war threats and with recession looming on the horizon.

Mineworkers must formulate their own demands and reach out to their brothers and sisters across the US and worldwide who are beginning to engage in significant struggles. This means fighting for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-corporate unions and Democratic and Republican parties, to join workers together across borders and across industries to fight to put an end to capitalism and exploitation and replace it with socialism. The mining industries must be placed under the public ownership of the working class so that the wealth they create can be used to meet social need, not the private profit interests of a wealthy few.



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