

# United Steelworkers, unions keep striking Asarco mineworkers in the dark

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18 October 2019

The United Steelworkers (USW), Teamsters and other trade unions have kept roughly 1,800 Asarco mineworkers in the dark three days after they went on strike on Sunday and Monday.

The unions and company had not engaged in any bargaining talks through Wednesday, according to press reports. Workers had been working under a 2018 extension of the 2017 contract up until Friday, when 77 percent voted to go on strike after rejecting the company's "last, best and final offer."

Workers are demanding pay raises, health care benefits, safer working conditions and shorter working hours. Workers at the Asarco mines in the US, under the ownership of the Grupo Mexico mining conglomerate, work 12 hours per day in dangerous conditions. Asarco has repeatedly refused to pay to install needed health and safety measures to protect miners.

Workers have not had pay raises since 2009 and would need at least a 20 percent wage increase to recoup losses from inflation. Asarco is demanding an additional four-year pay freeze, a freeze of all existing pensions, and that workers more than double their health care contributions in the new contract. The company has refused to pay workers \$10 million in bonuses owed since 2014, despite being ordered to by an arbitrator and in court rulings.

Bonuses were lost as part of a concessions contract pushed through with the aid of the unions in 2011. The same contract lowered pensions for workers hired in June of the same year. The bonuses replaced the cost of living (COLA) increases lost after the betrayal of the bitter Phelps Dodge strike of 1983-1984 in Morenci, Arizona. As the copper companies have laid off thousands of workers over decades, and clawed back wages, benefits and bonuses owed to workers, the USW has done nothing.

The strike has garnered support from workers on Facebook, who have denounced the decade-long assault on wages and benefits and dispelled rumors circulating

that purported that mineworkers make \$30 per hour on average.

One worker wrote: "My son works for the mines ... As explained these workers have not had a pay increase in ten years. Their insurance has gone up a lot. The mines are a billion dollar company, so I understand why [they are] asking for a raise."

"Out at Asarco you start at \$16 and after your probationary period you go up to \$18-\$20," one worker remarked in response to the assertion that Asarco mineworkers are paid much more than others.

Another worker added, "I work there as a contractor and talk to a lot of the union workers. They max out at \$21.75, and they're owed back pay and bonuses and the company has been cutting benefits for years. These guys are long over due for anything. I'd be out there with y'all if I could. My company won't hold my job unfortunately, the minute I don't show up, I'm replaced."

The USW "represents" the majority of striking workers at the mines across Arizona and Texas. After an initial press release on October 11 to announce the strike, it has not released any updates on the status of bargaining talks between the company and the union, or any concrete demands.

Current USW President Tom Conway led negotiations for the union in contract talks with ArcelorMittal, US Steel and major oil firms operating in the US in the past year. 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 oil workers 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's demands to continue the erosion of health and safety protections for workers.

The USW, Teamsters and other unions under the AFL-CIO have agreed to all the concessions demanded by Asarco and the other mining companies over the decades, and are in a hurry to end the strike as soon as possible. Rather than a fight for wages, benefits and safe working conditions, the USW has framed the workers' struggles as a strike against "unfair labor practices" in violation of the National Labor Relations Act.

Earlier this week, United Steelworkers District 12 Director Robert LaVenture said that the USW is willing to meet with Asarco to resume contract talks as long as necessary to reach a sellout agreement. 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."

LaVenture's statements are an appeal to nationalism, in line with the USW's support for the Trump administration's trade war measures, only posturing as opponents when it believes that they had not gone far enough. The USW, along with the other unions, is seeking to isolate the Asarco workers from 473 mineworkers on strike at Teck Carmen de Andacollo Operations in Chile and workers at the Antofagasta Minerals copper mine in Chile who will possibly go on strike next Wednesday.

The struggle is part of an upsurge in the global working class against the capitalist system as a whole and has the potential to expand to a nationwide and worldwide struggle. The entire union apparatus is seeking to prevent the mineworkers from linking up with 48,000 autoworkers on strike against General Motors nationwide and 30,000 public school teachers, on strike in Chicago since Thursday.

If isolated, the strike will end with a company-friendly contract that will usher in subsequent years of cuts to workers' livelihoods. Workers must look to the lessons of the past to see where they are headed.

The USW isolated over 2,000 mineworkers in the 1983-84 Phelps Dodge strike, allowing Democratic Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt to bring in the National Guard and state police to escort scabs across the picket lines.

The isolation and defeat of the Phelps Dodge strike was part of a process set in motion with the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers strike, in which the unions worked to

isolate and defeat workers in order to prove to the corporations that they were their trusted partners in the drive to cut costs in the name of allowing the companies to more successfully compete on the world market.

Striking workers at Asarco are determined to fight back, but they can only win if they break their struggle free of the unions and take the initiative to form rank-and-file organizations, to democratically discuss and put forth their own demands, including, but not limited to:

- \* An immediate 40 percent wage increase for all workers and restoration of COLA

- \* Fully funded health care and pension benefits for all workers

- \* Rank-and-file workers' oversight of all negotiations between the company and unions and contract voting process

- \* A return to the eight hour work day and restoration of thousands of lost jobs

- \* Election of rank-and-file safety committees in the mines to oversee all health, safety and environmental measures needed to protect workers

- \* Ample funding for research and development of safe mining and extraction techniques, and equipment that will end the risks to workers' lives and health

Mineworkers at Asarco have immense support from their brothers and sisters in the working class who are willing to fight with them. The task before Asarco mineworkers is to expand their strike by reaching out to their brothers and sisters across the US and worldwide who are beginning to engage in significant struggles.

This means fighting to form 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, with the mining industries placed under the public ownership of the working class so that the wealth they create can be used to meet the needs of their class, not the private profit interests of a wealthy few.



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