

United Steelworkers prepare betrayal of Asarco strike

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The strike of 1,800 Asarco mineworkers across Arizona and Texas has entered its second week. The company has stopped operations at its mines in Hayden, Arizona and Amarillo, Texas. Workers have reported on social media that in some locations scabs are being used by the company to cross the picket lines and continue production.

Asarco workers had been working without a contract since November 2018. Seventy-seven percent voted to strike after rejecting the company's "last, best and final offer" on October 11. They have not had pay raises at least a decade, meaning that they need at least a 20 percent wage increase to adjust for losses due to inflation. The company's contract offer demands an additional four-year pay freeze, a freeze of all existing pensions and a doubling of out-of-pocket health care contributions.

Asarco has also withheld \$10 million in bonuses due to the workers since 2014, even after being ordered to pay them by an arbitrator and through court rulings to do so. 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.

The majority of the workers on strike are in the United Steelworkers (USW). Other unions involved include the Teamsters, International Association of Machinists (IAMAW), International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and United Auto Workers (UAW). All of the trade unions are working together to keep workers completely isolated with the aim of ending the strike by wearing down workers' resolve in order to sign off on a concessions contract.

During the strike, the USW and other trade unions have given workers no information regarding contract negotiations between Asarco, owned by one of the world's largest mining operations, the Mexico City-

based Grupo Mexico mining conglomerate, and the various unions involved in drawing up the four-year agreement.

The USW claims that it has covered Asarco workers' living expenses out of its strike fund. Manny Armenta, a sub-district director for the United Steelworkers, told reporters at a Saturday press conference that the USW "take[s] care of [members'] utility bills, mortgage payments, car payments, it's all based on need."

In reality, the USW is stringing its members out on starvation rations. A memo released in August 2018 to workers at Arconic and Alcoa plants says the following on benefits to USW members from the strike and defense fund:

"The Fund pays to your Local Union \$225 per week per member, beginning with the fourth week of a strike or lockout ... the money is distributed on the basis of individual need. Each Local Union establishes a committee to assess needs and distribute the money."

In other words, workers will receive, on average, no more than \$225 per week, and only after four consecutive weeks on strike, and only if officials determine them to be in "need."

These struggles are part of a growing wave of global working class struggles against the capitalist system as a whole. They have the potential to expand to a nationwide and worldwide struggle. This is exactly what the unions are trying to prevent.

Posts and comments from workers on Facebook have shown an immense amount of support and solidarity from mineworkers and other sections of workers, encouraging the mineworkers to continue their strike even when faced with the use of scabs to undercut their struggle.

In one comment to an Asarco worker, one of the 48,000 striking workers at General Motors wrote:

"Brother, I stand in solidarity with you and the men and women on your line. I work for GM here in Arlington [Texas] and we are still on strike. It's been real rough being a single dad and not able to save. Financially this has hit me hard. They just increased our strike pay to \$275 per week. You can't pay really too much with that."

If the fate of the strike is left up to the unions, they will be defeated. Both the UAW at General Motors and the USW at Asarco are attempting to starve workers back to work on strike pay and to isolate them from one another to prevent them from linking up and creating a threat to the profit system which the unions serve.

The United Steelworkers has a long record of betrayal. The USW isolated over 2,000 mineworkers in the 1983-84 Phelps Dodge strike which allowed Democratic Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt to bring in the National Guard and state police to escort scabs across the picket lines. The USW was also responsible for the defeat of Asarco miners in a four-month-long strike of 2005 and pushed through subsequent concessions contracts thereafter.

In 2015, the USW enforced a defeat of a nationwide strike by refinery workers by calling out only a handful of refineries. When it ended the strike, it left workers at the Marathon refinery in Galveston out by themselves, while it sent workers at other plants back to work.

Last year, the USW refused to call out workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal in spite of a unanimous strike authorization vote. Instead, it pushed through a concessions contract with no guarantees against layoffs and which failed to recoup the wages lost by workers under a three-year pay freeze.

The USW has also isolated workers on an international level, refusing to link workers with thousands of mineworkers in Chile and other parts of the world who are entering into struggle.

These betrayals are part of a universal transformation of the unions, which accept the capitalist system and agree to wage cuts to keep corporations in "their own" countries competitive against foreign rivals, into arms of corporate management.

The Asarco strikers must take the initiative to take the struggle into their own hands, out from under the control of the pro-corporate, nationalist trade unions and to expand the strike on a national and international level.

To do this means that striking workers at Asarco must form rank-and-file organizations, independent of the pro-corporate unions and Democratic and Republican parties, 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. If they are not to be defeated, they must expand their strike by reaching out to their brothers and sisters across the US and worldwide, to join workers together across borders and across industries.

Behind Asarco and the Grupo Mexico conglomerate stands a united ruling class which is determined to ramp up exploitation everywhere. Because of this, the fight by Asarco miners is a fight against capitalism. The fight to defend jobs and living standards in the mines is inseparable with the fight for socialism. The mining industry must be 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, and the profit system of exploitation by the wealthy few.

We encourage workers who wish to learn more about how to form rank-and-file committees to take the strike forward to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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