

United Steelworkers, Asarco announce negotiations to resume, as union prepares sell-out contract

Jessica Goldstein
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Contract negotiations between Asarco and unions led by the United Steelworkers (USW) are scheduled to resume on November 14, one month after 1,800 copper mine workers walked off the job over the weekend of October 12.

Workers voted by a margin of 77 percent to strike on October 11 after rejecting Asarco's "last, best and final offer." Workers are fighting against the company's demands for an additional four-year wage freeze after a decade of no wage increases, a doubling of workers' out-of-pocket health care costs and a freeze of all existing pensions.

Mine workers face deadly conditions each time they go into work in the Asarco's open pit copper mines scattered across Texas and Arizona. Copper smelting releases toxic chemicals, and workers have been killed in accidents with mining equipment, most notably haul trucks used that lack visibility for over 30 feet around the vehicles and do not have any proximity-detection systems. Both the company and unions have refused to address these critical safety issues in an effort to cut costs and boost profits in an increasingly competitive global metals market.

Workers in the USW will begin to receive strike pay this week "based on need" determined by the union. The USW offers a *maximum* payment of just \$225 per week in strike pay. As a result of the USW's efforts to starve workers into submission, mine workers have resorted to food banks and subsidized medical clinics to afford basic necessities.

Asarco announced on Thursday that it will begin to initiate payments to workers for a total of \$10 million in copper price bonuses that the company stole from them between the third quarter of 2011 and the first

quarter of 2015, followed by a separate check for interest calculated through March 2016. The first round of backpay checks are set to be issued on November 6.

The copper price bonuses (owed to workers only if copper prices surpass a specific threshold) were implemented to replace annual cost-of-living (COLA) wage increases when the USW pushed through a company-friendly contract with Phelps Dodge after an intense strike of more than 2,000 copper mine workers in Morenci, Arizona, from 1983 to 1984. Asarco merged with Phelps Dodge in 1999.

A 2011 contract extension pushed through by the USW negotiated the denial of bonuses to workers and dropped many workers from the company pension plan. Asarco resumed payment of the bonuses in 2015 after being ordered to do so by the courts in a 2014 arbitration ruling. Federal court orders to the company to pay back the bonuses were ignored by Asarco until the beginning of October this year.

The USW is attempting to paint the \$10 million total payout as a victory for the workers who have sacrificed their wages and benefits for over a decade. In reality, workers will only receive a few thousand dollars each, barely enough to recoup lost wages during the strike, let alone the past decade. The move is part of a strategy to bait workers into accepting a concessions contract.

Asarco's mines are owned by the Mexico City-based mining conglomerate, Grupo Mexico. According to third-quarter financial reports released in October, its net consolidated profits of \$250 million equaled its profits in the same quarter last year. This is despite the decline of copper prices in the past year. The impact of lower prices was offset by increases in production in Mexico, Peru and the US.

The USW has whipped up anti-Mexican nationalism to divert the anger of workers, blaming “executives in Mexico City” for the attacks on workers. Regardless of their national base, copper mines across the globe are owned and operated by international conglomerates that coordinate the exploitation of workers in several countries to amass their financial profits.

Workers must be warned against thinking that somehow the USW and other trade unions will win substantial gains for them. Following the same agenda as it did before in forcing concessions on steel and oilworkers over the past year, the USW and other unions have worked to isolate the Asarco workers and keep them in the dark about the unions’ dealings with the company.

Asarco workers have to look back at the lessons of the betrayals of their struggles by the unions in recent decades. The USW isolated more than 2,000 copper mine workers in the 1983-1984 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 responsible for the defeat of Asarco miners in the four-month-long strike of 2005, which resulted in a concessions contract including pitiful \$1.00-per-hour wage increases over the life of the contract, no guarantee against layoffs and only partial restoration of health care benefits for retirees who had theirs cut in 2003. The USW and other unions hailed the sellout as a “victory.”

During the 2005 strike, the USW and other unions attempted to strike a pose as internationalists in a number of staged actions with Mexican national miners union Los Mineros, under which workers in Grupo Mexico mines in Mexico are organized. In reality, the trade unions worldwide isolate workers in each country to prevent them from linking their struggles, allowing the capitalist class to more easily continue to suppress wages and cut jobs worldwide.

The copper mine workers on strike against Asarco in the southwestern US are a part of a growing wave of workers’ struggles against the capitalist system worldwide. In Chile, which produces about 28 percent of the world’s copper supply, mine workers’ strikes are intersecting with mass anti-government protests against austerity that have drawn in the widest layers of the working class.

Rather than making an appeal to the working class throughout the US and in Latin America, the unions are attempting to wrap up the strike as soon as possible and push through a concessions contract to offset any losses incurred by disruptions in the international metals market.

To break from the isolation imposed by the unions, 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

The mine workers have great allies in the international working class. The nationalism and pro-capitalist politics of the trade unions must be counterposed by a movement of the workers in the mines based in an internationalist and socialist perspective. The struggles of mine workers in the US for higher wages, lower health care costs, guaranteed retirement and safe working conditions raise immediate political questions of an international and socialist character, which can only be fought for on an international scale.



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