

Strike against Asarco copper enters second month

Samuel Davidson
16 November 2019

The strike by 2,000 copper miners in Arizona and Texas has entered its second month. Workers at six mines and a preparation plant in Arizona and Texas owned by Asarco have been out since October 12.

For the first time since the start of the strike, negotiations were set to resume Thursday. However, the United Steelworkers (USW), which leads nine different unions that represent workers in the mines, is keeping workers in the dark. The union has not issued any statements on the talks, not even confirming that they took place. In fact, the USW has not issued any statement about the strike since announcing the resumption of negotiations more than two weeks ago.

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 the out-of-pocket expenses that workers currently pay.

Asarco is part of the Mexican conglomerate Grupo Mexico, the third largest copper producer in the world through its stake in Asarco, 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.

Grupo Mexico reported profits of over \$250 million last quarter, the same as the previous year, or roughly \$1 billion annually.

Despite these massive profits, Asarco is holding firm on their demands for further concessions. Additionally,

the company refused to pay more than \$10 million in bonuses owed to workers despite being ordered to do so by an arbitrator and in several court rulings. After years of appeals, Asarco said they would begin the payments this month, which will amount to at best to a few thousand dollars per miner.

The current walkout follows previous contract betrayals by the USW. Since 2011 the union has been working directly with Asarco to impose one concessions deal after another.

The United Steelworkers has classified the current strike as an “unfair labor practice” strike, claiming that Asarco is not following rules and regulations set under the National Labor Relations Act. In other words, the USW is not demanding a decent contract for its members, but has limited the strike to the demand that Asarco bargain with the union in good faith.

The USW is hoping that the return to negotiations along with bonus payments, something the workers already earned, will be enough to convince workers to return to work. From the beginning the USW has been collaborating with the company against the miners; imposing a virtual news blackout while isolating the miners from other powerful sections of workers, including steelworkers, coal miners, teachers and autoworkers.

Miners had to wait four weeks before receiving their first, totally inadequate \$225 check from the USW strike fund, which contains over \$150 million. Meanwhile, workers have had to turn to food banks to feed their families, and churches and other charities for clothes and school supplies for their children.

Even the totally inadequate strike pay does not come without strings. Workers must beg their union officials for the money, as the USW has declared that strike assistance will only be paid out “based on need.”

Above all, the USW is seeking to keep the miners struggle separated from the struggle of copper miners internationally, above all in Latin America, which is the largest producer of copper in the world. In particular, the USW is seeking to keep the US copper miners isolated from copper miners in Chile who have also been engaged in strike struggle against both companies and their government.

The USW has sought to drive a wedge between American workers and their brother workers overseas as it lines up behind the reactionary “America First” program of the Trump administration and its drive for trade war. This goes hand in hand with the corporatist program of the USW calling on workers to unite with “their” companies against “foreign” rivals. The USW is one of the main supporters of the Trump tariffs on steel and aluminum, criticizing the White House only for not going far enough and imposing tariffs on more products.

In 2018 the USW pushed through sellout contracts at United States Steel and ArcelorMittal, justifying this on the grounds that workers needed to help the companies remain “viable” in the face of foreign competition.

In the current strike, the USW is seeking to whip up the same nationalism and chauvinism. The USW is saying that this strike has not been called to fight for better pay, health care and pensions, but only to protest the fact that Grupo Mexico doesn’t want to follow American labor laws. Asarco workers need to be aware of the treacherous role played by the USW and other unions in betraying the struggles of miners, steelworkers and other sections of the working class.

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. Among management’s demands 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, along with strikes by workers at International Paper and United States Steel.

Copper miners can place no confidence in the USW, Teamsters or any of the other unions at Asarco. Instead, the *World Socialist Web Site* is working for the formation of rank-and-file committees of the most trusted workers, 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 workday 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

At every point the just and reasonable demands of workers clash with the profit interests of the transnational corporations. However, mineworkers have powerful allies in the international working class. The nationalism and pro-capitalist politics of the trade unions must be opposed through the development of a movement based on an internationalist and socialist perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact