

Some production resumes as US copper miners' strike drags on

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The United Steelworkers (USW), Teamsters and seven other unions are continuing the isolation of 2,000 striking copper miners in Arizona and Texas, now in their seventh week off the job.

Asarco, which owns and operates the mines, has resumed some small-scale production using management and scabs who have crossed the picket line in an effort to break the strike.

The USW, which leads the nine different unions that represent workers in the mines, has downplayed this development, telling workers in a statement that, "It is illegal to permanently replace or threaten to permanently replace employees who are on an Unfair Labor Practice strike."

In fact, the Trump administration's National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has yet to make a ruling on the strike, and, even if they do declare in the unions' favor, the company can continue its operations as long as it shows it have bargained in good faith.

The unions originally filed an NLRB complaint against the company in 2015, during the Obama administration, charging that Asarco was negotiating in bad faith. The company filed countercharges, and neither of those complaints have been finally determined by the NLRB.

The unions have since filed additional charges, that the company was seeking to bypass the unions and negotiate directly with the miners when it presented its final offer. Those charges also have not been ruled on.

The first set of talks between Asarco and the USW took place on November 14 and produced no results. The company presented the same concessionary demands that workers overwhelmingly rejected when they voted to strike.

Those talks were the first since the start of the strike, and no date for another round of talks has been set.

Most likely, the company was complying with a legal formality to satisfy the NLRB claim, which it will now request be dismissed.

Workers at the mines have not had a pay raise since 2009. In a series of concessionary contracts and contract extensions, the USW pushed through cuts to pensions and health care, all in the name of saving the company at the expense of the miners.

Despite reporting millions in profits, Asarco's current proposal contains no pay raise, a freeze on pensions and the doubling of workers' out-of-pocket costs for health care.

Asarco can allow the strike to drag on until workers are either starved into accepting its offer or, after a year has elapsed, the company can organize a vote to have the unions decertified.

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

The USW is pointing to the Mexican ownership of the mine to seek to whip up nationalism and chauvinism. The union is saying that this strike is not for better pay, health care and pensions, not part of the struggle against the capitalist system, but is only necessary because the Mexico-based Grupo Mexico doesn't want to follow American labor laws.

A look at Grupo Mexico shows that it operates just as all multinational corporations do, seeking to drive down wages and benefits, and obtain tax cuts while skirting environmental concerns, all in the drive to

maximize profits for its shareholders.

Grupo Mexico is itself the outcome of the privatization of the mining industry in Mexico in the 1970s and 80s, as part of the attack on the Mexican working class. Grupo Mexico was formed in 1978. After the government of Carlos Salinas declared the state mining company bankrupt, Grupo Mexico began buying up the mines at pennies on the dollar.

In a series of bitter confrontations with mine workers, which were betrayed by the Mexican Mine Workers' Union, the company was able to push through concessions and increase productivity.

Soon Grupo Mexico became the largest copper miner in Mexico, owning nearly 90 percent of Mexico's copper production and also branching out, buying mines in Chile and the United States. Grupo Mexico is the third largest copper producer in the world.

However, in attacking Grupo Mexico for being a Mexican company, the USW is seeking to pit workers in the United States against their class brothers and sisters in Mexico, Chile and throughout the world.

Only a unified struggle of workers against the capitalist system can ensure victory. The USW does not represent the interests of its members but is rather a tool of the corporations against the working class.

In seeking to whip up nationalism and chauvinism, the USW is working to keep the struggle of the copper miners isolated from other powerful sections of workers in the US, including steelworkers, coal miners, teachers and autoworkers.

Above all the USW is working to prevent the struggle of copper miners linking up with the struggle of workers internationally, above all in Latin America, which is the largest producer of copper in the world. The union fears above all that the workers in the United States unite with their class brothers and sisters throughout the world.

Copper miners can place no confidence in the United Steelworkers, Teamsters or any of the other unions at Asarco, instead they must form rank and file committees of the most trusted workers, independent of the pro-corporate unions and the 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

Asarco workers have powerful allies in the international working class. The struggles of mine workers in the US for higher wages, lower health care costs, guaranteed retirement and safe working conditions raise critical political questions. The nationalism and pro-capitalist politics of the trade unions must be answered by a movement based on a socialist perspective.



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