

Asarco copper miner strike in Arizona and Texas in danger

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Nearly 2,000 copper miners remain on strike against Asarco LLC at three open pit mines in southern Arizona, a refinery in Amarillo, Texas and a smelter in Hayden, Arizona, 95 miles southeast of Phoenix. The miners walked out October 13 after overwhelmingly voting to strike against Asarco's demands to extend a decade-long pay freeze for most workers, double out-of-pocket health care costs and gut pension benefits.

On December 2, the company made its "last, best and final offer" to the 1,800 striking workers. While operations at the smelter and refinery have been shut by the strike, Asarco is continuing operations at its mines with strikebreakers protected by heavily armed private security guards.

Asarco, founded in 1888 as the American Smelting and Refining Company by William Rockefeller and other business partners, has long been notorious for unsafe working conditions, poisoning mining communities and brutal labor relations. Between 1959 and the early 1980s, Asarco and the other US copper giants, Phelps Dodge and Kennecott, faced strikes virtually every three years.

Miners in this region have a courageous tradition of bitter class struggle, including the 1917 Phelps Dodge strike when armed vigilantes expelled thousands of striking miners and left-wing militants from the mining town of Bisbee, Arizona.

Beginning with the defeat of the 1983-86 Phelps Dodge strike, which was isolated and betrayed by the United Steelworkers (USW) and the AFL-CIO, copper miners have suffered decades of union-backed concessions. After the rollback of wages and conditions of Asarco workers, including after the 1990 strike, Grupo México, a giant mining and railroad conglomerate, outbid Phelps Dodge to acquire Asarco in 1999, becoming the third largest copper producer in

the world.

Asarco strikers remain determined, but the coalition of eight unions, led by the USW and Teamsters, has left workers isolated again, stringing them out on starvation-level strike benefits and dependent on local food banks. Meanwhile, union officials are taking home their full salaries, including USW President Thomas Conway (over \$200,000) and Teamsters President James P. Hoffa (\$400,000).

On Monday, the unions organized a protest outside of Asarco's Tucson office as part of a day of demonstrations against Grupo México, including at the CMX Theaters it owns in eight states. "Grupo México is a rogue company that believes it can ignore US labor laws, violate international labor standards, recklessly exploit the environment and abuse US workers and their communities like they do in Mexico," said Karla Schumann, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 104, in a statement.

According to the union bureaucrats, the problem is Mexican-owned companies, as if US-owned corporations treated workers with loving care. The fact is copper miners are fighting a transnational corporation operating across South America, which is controlled not only by Mexican billionaire German Larrea Mota Velasco but giant financial institutions, including the Wall Street investment firms Fidelity, Vanguard and Lazard.

The USW has good reason to conceal the role of Asarco's major investors given the fact that USW President Leo Gerard hired Lazard Vice President Ron Bloom as a special assistant in the early 1990s when the USW colluded with Wilbur Ross and other steel bosses to cut the jobs, wages and pensions of steelworkers.

From the beginning of the strike, the unions have

promoted Democratic Party politicians like Tucson Mayor Regina Romero and US Senator Bernie Sanders as supposed friends of labor. But the Democrats are the class enemies of workers, no less hostile to their interests than Trump and the Republicans. It should be recalled that Arizona Democratic Governor Bruce Babbitt (dubbed by miners “Governor Scabbitt”) dispatched hundreds of National Guard to break the strike of Phelps Dodge miners.

From Arizona Democratic Governor Janet Napolitano to current Republican Governor Doug Ducey, both corporate-controlled parties have protected Asarco and other copper companies from environmental fines and handed them tax cuts and subsidies, including a \$1.5 million grant in 2012. Meanwhile, both parties have cut school funding and teacher salaries to the bone, provoking Arizona educators to carry out a wildcat strike in 2018.

The anti-Mexican propaganda is aimed at concealing the fact that the unions have been collaborating with Grupo México for decades, from the betrayal of the four-month strike in 2005, to the givebacks in 2009 and the 2017 contract, which eliminated pensions for new hires and paved the way for the draconian demands Asarco is seeking to impose now.

Other miners are revolting against the USW, including 200 silver, lead and zinc miners at the Lucky Friday Mine near Mullan, Idaho, who rejected a union-backed tentative agreement earlier this week with Hecla Mining Co. despite being on strike since March 2017. Miners are fighting to defend rights to pick their own crew that have existed for three-quarters of a century.

Through its attack on the copper miners, Asarco, is seeking to position itself as a low-cost copper producer in the United States. After a long period of declining demand for copper as construction switched from using copper to plastic piping, demand for copper is growing and is expected to continue to increase, particularly with the growth of solar and wind electric generation and electric vehicles.

The USW has long peddled economic nationalism in order to justify the endless concessions it has imposed on workers in the name of making companies more “competitive” and profitable. It has also done this to drive a wedge between US workers and workers all over the world, even though copper miners in Chile and many other countries are fighting the same

transnational corporations.

The unions are isolating the strike to push through a new set of concessions which will become the standard throughout the industry, and to provide an object lesson to workers of what will happen if they oppose the concessions demanded by the companies.

To oppose this isolation and organize the fight for a decent living standard, benefits and safe working conditions, the *World Socialist Web Site* urges copper workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the USW and other corrupt unions, to expand the strike throughout the copper industry and beyond.

Instead of dead-end appeals to big business politicians, these strike committees should appeal to teachers, manufacturing, logistics, service and retail workers to organize mass picketing to stop Asarco’s strikebreaking operations and launch an industrial counter-offensive against the relentless attack on jobs and living standards. At the same time, US workers must appeal to copper and other miners in Mexico and around the world for common action.

These committees will democratically discuss and put forth their own demands that copper miners and their families need, not what the bosses, politicians and union officials say is affordable. This should include a 40 percent wage increase to make up for the last 10 years, cost of living increases, fully funded health and pension benefits and workers’ control of production to ensure safe working conditions.

Workers in France, Mexico, the US and around the world are saying, “Enough is enough!” The struggles must be united internationally and guided by a new socialist program, including the transformation of the metal mining industry into a public utility, collectively owned and democratically controlled by working people.

We urge striking miners to contact the Socialist Equality Party, which will do everything to assist workers in building rank-and-file strike committees and to establish lines of communication with workers in the US and around the world.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact