

Asarco strike poses need for unity of US and Mexican copper miners

Real internationalism vs. the United Steelworkers' partnership with Los Mineros

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The strike by 1,800 copper miners at Asarco facilities in Arizona and Texas has entered its fourth month. Miners and their families are continuing to bravely oppose the copper giant's demands for the doubling of health care costs, the extension of a decade-long pay freeze for the majority of workers and attacks on pensions. The strike began on October 13, two days after workers voted by a more than three-to-one margin to oppose the company's "last, best and final" ultimatum.

The United Steelworkers, Teamsters and six other unions at the company have continued to isolate the strike. Meanwhile, union officials are telling workers to look to Trump's National Labor Relations Board, Arizona's Governor Doug Ducey and the Democratic Party for support.

All of this is worse than useless. Even if the NLRB rules in the strikers' favor that the walkout is over unfair labor practices, this will not stop the company's demands for unprecedented concessions, but only open a path for the USW to end the strike on management's terms.

Ducey will be no help either. The multi-millionaire head of the Cold Stone Creamery ice cream chain is a tool of the state's corporate interests whose hostility to public education provoked the statewide wildcat strike by teachers in 2018. As for the Democrats, veteran copper miners will never forget that it was the "pro-labor" Democratic governor of Arizona Bruce Babbitt (dubbed Bruce "Scabbitt" by miners) who dispatched hundreds of national guard troops to crush the Phelps Dodge copper miner strike in 1983.

Union officials, including AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, Teamsters President James P. Hoffa and USW President Tom Conway, have focused their criticism of Asarco on its Mexican ownership, saying conglomerate Grupo Mexico—the world's fourth largest copper producer—is a rogue employer that must be pressured to abide by US labor laws. The unions are deliberately concealing three basic facts.

First, some of the largest shareholders of this "Mexican company" are US-based Wall Street firms. Second, US labor laws have not stopped the corporations, including red, white and blue American-owned companies, from waging a four-decade war against the working class in the US and around the world. Third, the entire copper and metal mining industry is dominated by giant global corporations, including Phoenix, Arizona-based Freeport-McMoRan, which bought Phelps Dodge in 2007, the British-Australian giant Rio Tinto, which bought Kennecott Copper in 1989, Australia-based BHP Billiton, and Codelco, the state-owned company in Chile, which is the largest copper producer in the world.

It is not possible to wage an isolated struggle against giant transnational corporations. Asarco miners have to break out of the straitjacket imposed on their struggle by the USW and other unions, and form rank-and-file strike committees to fight for the extension of the strike throughout the

copper and metal mining industry, not only in the US but internationally. This includes joint strikes and other actions with Grupo Mexico workers south of the border.

On the Asarco picket lines in Arizona and Texas, there is widespread sentiment for international solidarity and cross-border action with Mexican and South American miners. In an effort to retain credibility among striking miners, the USW and other unions have repeatedly pointed to their close collaboration with the National Union of Mine, Metal, Steel and Allied Workers of the Mexican Republic (STNMM), commonly known as "Los Mineros."

However, despite the long relationship between the unions, which dates back at least two decades, neither the USW or Los Mineros have ever called cross-border strikes or any other significant international actions when Mexican or US miners have been on strike against Grupo Mexico or any of the other mining giants. On the contrary, the "international solidarity" has largely been limited to the issuing of press releases.

It is worth taking a closer look at the long-standing leader of Los Mineros, Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, who the USW and AFL-CIO hail as the heroic leader of an "independent union." Gomez, an Oxford-educated economist who never worked a day in the mines, inherited his position from his father—Napoleon Gomez Sada—who ruled the union for four decades until he passed it over to his son in 2001. The elder Gomez was one of the *charros* (corrupt union bosses) installed by the former ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to head off left-wing opposition from the working class to the PRI and the gangsters who controlled the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM).

Working class opposition to the Mexican trade union apparatus, and to Napoleon Gomez Urrutia in particular, erupted after a methane explosion on February 19, 2006, which killed 65 workers at Grupo Mexico's Pasta de los Conchos mine in the Mexican state of Coahuila, close to the border of Texas. Less than two weeks before, the union had signed off on a government report deeming the Conchos mine safe.

After the blast, relatives of the killed miners called Gomez a "rat" for refusing to visit the mine for a week after the explosion, and then chased him from the mine into management's offices when he finally showed up. The union's collaboration with government inspectors and the corporations was exposed when Gomez could not explain why the union did not make efforts to close the mine before the explosion after inspectors found critical safety violations at the mine two weeks earlier, including high levels of explosive methane gas.

After copper and zinc miners at Grupo Mexico launched wildcat strikes over the company's callous disregard for safety, Gomez had no choice but to denounce the company for "industrial homicide" and call a one-day

strike by the union's 250,000 members. Shortly afterwards, the Labor Ministry decided to remove Gomez from the leadership of the union after he was accused of embezzling \$55 million from a union trust.

Although he had faithfully served the capitalist government in Mexico—colluding in stripping away Mexican mine and steelworkers' benefits, pensions and wages—the administration of Vicente Fox moved against Gomez because it lost confidence in his ability to suppress the growing militancy of the working class. Gomez also angered Fox by resisting his administration's efforts to reform the long-term corporatist relations between the companies, the unions and the government, which helped enrich the bloated labor bureaucracy.

With the help of the USW bureaucracy in the US and Canada, Gomez fled to Vancouver, Canada, with his family, and the Canadian government protected him against extradition requests from the Mexican government and Interpol. According to former USW President Leo Gerard, the USW brought Gomez across the US border where he was sheltered by then-USW district director Terry Bonds in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Soon after he went to Vancouver, Canada, where he worked out of the USW's District 3 office for 12 years.

In 2005, the USW and Los Mineros signed a Strategic Alliance, later expanded to a Solidarity Alliance between the two unions at the USW International Convention in 2011. Between 2006 and 2014, while Mexican and US copper miners took part in several strikes, the two unions did everything to separate workers across the borders and prevent a common struggle. "We're perfectly aware that we the unions have to have enough flexibility to adapt ourselves to the production cycles. We want to be a responsible union," Gomez told the *Wall Street Journal* in January 2014, making it clear the union would continue to sanction job and wage cuts during economic slowdowns. "But wages have also to go significantly up when the price of a pound of copper rockets 600%, as it has happened in the last five years."

The embezzlement accusations stemmed from the management of a trust set up in the late 1980s, when Gomez's father sanctioned the privatization of several state-owned mining companies. The trust set aside 5 percent of the shares sold for workers at those mines. In 2005, Gomez and other union leaders dissolved the trust and sent the money to a union bank account. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, a Mexican congressional investigation in 2006 found that many of the workers did not get the funds. They sued Gomez for fraud, accusing him of using the money to support an extravagant lifestyle of private jet travel and luxuries. Gomez contended that the money was for the union, not individual workers.

In August 2014, a panel of Mexican federal judges ruled that the union legally took control of the money from the trust and voided criminal charges against Gomez. The judges did not rule on whether the money was then used illegally, and the workers are continuing to demand their money.

The ruling was part of the decision to rehabilitate Gomez since his services were again required as Mexican workers began a new upsurge. In 2017, Los Mineros endorsed the presidential campaign of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, known as AMLO, a left-talking defender of capitalism who promised workers improvements. With the backing of AMLO's Morena party, Gomez won a senate seat in August 2018 and returned to Mexico after 10 years in exile.

The chief interest of the USW, the AFL-CIO and Los Mineros is not to unify workers across the border. On the contrary, they have joined together to prevent the growing revolt of Mexican workers against the corrupt and gangster ridden CTM from taking a left-wing and anti-capitalist form, threatening the interests of US multinationals and posing the danger of spreading the "infection" of socialism and internationalism to American workers coming into their own struggles like Asarco.

This was shown when 70,000 auto parts and electronics workers in the *maquiladora* factories in Matamoros, Mexico, rebelled against the CTM

in January and February 2019, carrying banners saying the "Unions and the Bosses kill the working class" and marching to the border to appeal to American workers to join their strikes. Gomez announced the founding of the "International Labor Confederation" (CIT) with the Electrician's Union (SME) on February 13, 2019, one day after striking Fisher Dynamics workers in Matamoros sent a video to the *World Socialist Web Site* expressing their solidarity with General Motors workers fighting plant closures in the US and Canada.

Faced with a rebellion by the workers, the Matamoros branch of Los Mineros—which is ostensibly independent of the CTM—went to the mass democratic assemblies of workers to insist that workers "keep confidence in our [municipal] president," a member of the Morena party, and remain tied to the "authorities," including the CTM unions.

Gomez belongs to the Executive Committee of IndustriAll, a supposed "global union" made up of the labor bureaucracies in North America and Europe, which began to construct what it referred to as "free and independent trade unions" in Mexico, based on the labor-management partnerships of the unions in North America and Europe, and an explicit rejection of genuine international solidarity of the working class and its striving toward socialism.

These so-called "independent unions" were a key factor in the drafting of US President Donald Trump's US-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) trade deal, which is aimed at strengthening the US transnational corporations against China and other competitors. Under the USMCA, the Mexican government will encourage the formation of "independent unions"—that is, unions run by corporate stooges like Gomez.

The Mexican mine workers union is also a partner with the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, the US government-funded institution that works with the US State Department operations to destabilize and overthrow any government, such as in Venezuela, deemed hostile to the global interests of American imperialism. The Solidarity Center's predecessor was the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), the CIA "labor" front involved in one US-backed military coup after another. This includes the 1973 overthrow of the Chilean government of Salvador Allende, which had nationalized the holdings of US copper giants Anaconda and Kennecott. The dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet installed by the US, with the full backing of the AIFLD, carried out a brutal campaign of murder, torture and repression of left-wing workers, students and copper miners, the vanguard of the Chilean working class.

Striking workers at Asarco need to unify with workers across the US, Mexico and beyond. To fight for this, however, they will have to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the USW, Teamsters and other pro-company unions that are only preparing another defeat. Instead, workers should build rank-and-file strike committees to extend the strike throughout the copper and metal mining industry and to unite US and Mexican workers in a common battle against Grupo Mexico and its Wall Street backers.

This must be combined with a political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties and the development of a powerful political movement to fight for socialism, including the transformation of the giant transnational mining corporations into public utilities, collectively owned and democratically controlled by workers, as part of the reorganization of the world economy to meet human needs, instead of corporate profit.

The authors also recommend:

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