

A monstrous betrayal of nearly 10-month struggle

United Steelworkers shuts down strike by Asarco copper miners

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The United Steelworkers has closed down picket lines and ordered the 1,800 striking Asarco copper miners to accept any job offered by the company or risk losing their unemployment benefits and any recall rights.

The decision by the USW, the Teamsters and the five other unions represents a monstrous betrayal of the striking workers. Workers at the Asarco copper mines and processing plants in Arizona and Texas had been on strike since Oct 13 after rejecting the company's "last, best and final offer."

The miners had been working without a contract since November 2018. The company's final offer froze wages for two-thirds of the workers and froze pension benefits for all workers, while increasing workers' share of health benefits. Asarco miners had not received a pay raise since 2009, 11 years ago.

From the start of the strike, the United Steelworkers insisted that the walkout was not called to oppose the demands for massive concessions and win a better contract. Rather, the USW insisted, the strike was called only over the refusal of Asarco to negotiate with the unions in good faith.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned since the beginning of the strike, this policy was directed at isolating workers and prolonging the strike for months in order to beat down the workers' militancy.

After over eight months on strike, on June 16, District 28 office of the National Labor Relations Board issued a formal complaint against Asarco. The NLRB complaint states that the company did not negotiate with the USW, Teamsters and the other unions in good faith. The complaint includes bargaining with no intention of reaching an agreement, unilaterally implementing changes to working conditions and retaliation against union members.

Under US labor law, a strike ruled to be over "unfair labor practices," rather than for economic demands, places a few restrictions on the employer. They are required to rehire the strikers, while if the NLRB rules that the strike is over economic demands, the company is not required to rehire the strikers.

The USW presented the filing of the NLRB complaint as a

victory and told striking workers to take down the picket lines, even though none of the issues that workers went out on strike for have been resolved.

Furthermore, the unions instructed their members that they had to be willing to go back to work on an individual basis as they are offered jobs by the company, raising the possibility, if not the likelihood, that many workers will be blacklisted and victimized. Those workers who are called back will be working under the terms set by the company and with virtually no rights.

Demonstrating their role as nothing but an arm of management, the union further warned workers that if they are offered a job by the company and turn it down, they will be considered to have resigned and will lose their chance to be recalled. In addition, the union warned that workers who refused jobs could also lose their chance of collecting unemployment benefits.

In a letter to union members, the USW admitted that most workers would not end up getting called back, but tried to cover up their surrender with the promise that those workers would receive back pay.

"If a company refuses to reinstate the returning ULP (unfair labor practice) strikers based on the company's claim they have been permanently replaced," the letter states, "the returning ULP strikers are entitled to potential back pay from the company."

The filing of the NLRB complaint is far from a final legal determination. In fact, the filing of an NLRB complaint is more like an indictment or the filing of a civil suit, but in this case it will not go through the court system. NLRB complaints are handled internally within the National Labor Relations Board, which is part of the viciously anti-worker Trump administration.

The complaint will now go before an administrative judge, who will issue a ruling. If the judge rules in favor of the unions, it will be sent before the NLRB board to make a final decision.

Needless to say, even if the complaint does make it to the full NLRB board, it is not likely to rule in the workers' favor. The NLRB currently consists of three Republicans, all appointed by President Trump, who have consistently ruled in favor of big

business.

The company has already challenged the complaint, saying that the strike is over economic issues and that they have hired permanent replacements.

In response to the unions' offer to return to work, Asarco said in a letter dated July 8 and signed by Asarco human resources Director Stacy Sinele that it would not be terminating its "permanent replacements."

"The former strikers will be entitled to their former positions or to substantially equivalent positions to the extent they are available," the company said. "Those not reinstated will be placed on a preferential hire list."

The company said it is confident that the NLRB probe will result in a finding that the company "negotiated in good faith to an impasse."

"We think the evidence is overwhelming that the strike was related solely to economics notwithstanding the unions' self-serving comments to the contrary," the letter states.

It is no accident that that the USW is shutting down the copper miners' strike just as millions of workers throughout the country—autoworkers, teachers, postal workers, Amazon workers and UPS drivers—are coming into struggle against the murderous return to work drive by the Trump administration be carried out with the support of Trump's Democratic counterparts in Congress and state government.

The USW has a long history of betraying the struggles of steelworkers and copper miners. The isolation and defeat of the bitter 1983-84 strike against Phelps Dodge by the coalition of unions led by the USW helped set the stage for a corporate assault against the working class over the next decade.

During the Phelps Dodge strike the unions told the miners that they could rely upon Democratic Governor Bruce Babbitt. The so-called "friend of labor" mobilized hundreds of state police to occupy the mining towns of Morenci, Ajo and Clifton to protect the scabs being hired to replace the strikers.

Rather than mobilize the power of the working class to fight Phelps Dodge, the state police and the politicians, the USW worked to divert the strike into putting pressure on the Phelps Dodge board of directors through what it called a corporate campaign, an appeal to Phelps Dodge customers to not buy copper.

In the case of the Asarco workers the USW made a nationalist appeal, repeatedly pointing to the fact that Asarco is owned by Grupo Mexico, the world's fourth largest copper producer.

While Grupo Mexico has a long history of anti-worker actions, including a record of polluting the communities in which they operate, it is not fundamentally different from other transnational copper producers, including US-based companies.

Grupo Mexico is one of five or six transnational corporations which control much of the world's production and supply of copper. These businesses are owned by wealthy investors the world over, who are all seeking to drive down costs by attacking their workers and destroying the environment.

The copper industry is going through massive changes. After decades which saw the demand for copper falling as plastics replaced copper in piping, the demand for the metal has started to rise and is expected to grow rapidly, based on the growth of electric vehicle production, wind turbines and electric power generation.

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated this process. In the first quarter of the year prices fell as the world economy came to a near standstill. Prices started rebounding in the second quarter, reaching a recent high two-year high of \$6,393 a ton on July 13. They have since fallen somewhat.

The recent rise in price is due in part to renewed demand from China, which purchases half of the world's supply of copper, as well as fear that the unchecked spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in both the United States as well as Mexico and Chile could lead to further interruptions in supply.

The major copper producers are all seeking to cut costs, control a greater and greater share of production, and position themselves to make massive profits at the expense of their rivals and above all at the expense of the workers.

Furthermore, the United States, fearing the rise of China as a major competitor in the world market, is seeking to regain control of the production of copper along with all the rare-earth metals, which are essential for computers, telecommunications, renewable energy and above all military equipment.

Under these conditions, it is not possible to wage an isolated struggle against giant transnational corporations. Asarco workers and other miners must break out of the nationalist confines imposed by the unions and form rank-and-file committees that will unite all copper and other miners in the US and globally in a common struggle.

Asarco workers must draw the lessons of the betrayal by the USW. They should follow the lead of workers at auto plants in Michigan and Ohio, who have formed rank-and-file safety committees independent of the United Auto Workers in order to oppose the unsafe conditions they are being subjected to from the spread of the coronavirus.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party will do everything possible to assist copper miners in forming rank-and-file committees. To learn more, contact us today.



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