

# WSWS interviews Jorge O’Leary, leader of 1983–86 Phelps Dodge miners strike

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At midnight on June 30, 1983, nearly 3,000 Arizona copper miners employed by the Phelps Dodge Corporation went on strike in the desert camp towns of Ajo, Morenci, Douglas and Clifton. For three long years, strikers from 13 local unions fought a ruthless company and its thugs, police, the National Guard, the Reagan administration, the state’s Democratic governor, the National Labor Relations Board, federal court injunctions, and the AFL-CIO, which isolated the strike in order to ensure its defeat. In 1986, the strike was lost, and strikebreaking replacement workers voted to decertify the unions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Jorge O’Leary, a Mexican-born doctor at the company-owned Phelps Dodge Morenci Hospital, who was fired during the strike for disobeying orders that he refuse medical attention to strikers and their families. O’Leary, who is now 80 years old, set up a free medical clinic for strikers, became the *de facto* spokesperson for the striking miners, and was widely recognized by the national press as the strike’s popular leader. He presently lives in Tucson, Arizona.

During the strike, O’Leary worked closely with the Socialist Equality Party’s predecessor organization, the Workers League, and its publication, the *Bulletin*, which provided political direction for the strike as well as regular news and analysis of the corporation and the state and federal government’s strategy to defeat the miners.

The Workers League campaigned throughout the country and internationally to broaden the struggle into a general strike against the Reagan administration and Democratic Party attacks on jobs, wages, living standards and social programs. The strike coincided with a powerful strike of 150,000 miners in Britain that nearly brought down the Thatcher government in 1984–85, but which was similarly betrayed by the leadership of the National Union of Miners and Trade Union Congress.

The Workers League was involved in the Phelps Dodge struggle from beginning to end, and the *Bulletin* became a well-respected source of information and political advice among the strikers and their supporters. Throughout the strike, O’Leary worked particularly closely with then-Workers League National Secretary David North, who traveled regularly to Southeastern Arizona and grew to be trusted by the strikers as a political leader. North regularly spoke before meetings of miners and addressed working class audiences across the country, appealing for a national struggle in defense of the Phelps Dodge miners and opposing the AFL-CIO’s policy of isolating the strike.

The isolation and defeat of the strike was one of a series of milestones in the destruction of the trade union movement in the United States. In 1981, the AFL-CIO refused to call a general strike to support 11,000 PATCO workers, leading to Reagan’s mass firings and the decertification of the union. In 1985–86, the UFCW decertified Local P-9, comprised of 1,500 militant meatpacking workers in Austin, Minnesota, guaranteeing the defeat of their strike against Hormel. Similar struggles of paper mill workers in International Falls, Minnesota, in 1989 and of Pittston coal miners in Virginia and West Virginia in 1989–90 were isolated by the

trade unions and crushed.

The *Bulletin* and Workers League explained that the ruling class was exacting vengeance for the semi-insurrectionary strike wave of the 1930s, when millions of workers rebelled against the conservative AFL and won massive concessions from American capitalism. The AFL-CIO, which had adopted a strategy of “corporatism,” sided with management and facilitated wage cuts and job losses throughout the 1980s.

The *Bulletin* warned that American capitalism was “out to destroy the trade union organizations of the working class... What they are aiming at goes far beyond wage concessions. Massive unemployment, the destruction of welfare programs such as Social Security and Medicare, the elimination of democratic rights—in short the impoverishment of the working class.”

These warnings were proven correct. In the decades that followed, inequality skyrocketed and US trade union membership in the private sector shrank. While the richest 10 percent of the US owned 63 percent of wealth in 1985, they owned 77 percent of wealth by 2018. The share of the top 0.1 percent rose from 7 percent in 1986 to 22 percent in 2012. Private sector union membership fell from 26 percent in 1973 to just 6.3 percent today. The AFL-CIO dug its own grave. Today, workers do not view the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions as workers organizations, as evidenced by the fact that the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) could only muster votes from 12 percent of the 5,800 highly exploited Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama.

An entire generation of members of today’s Socialist Equality Party played leading roles in these struggles, which rooted the work of the movement firmly in the experiences of the working class. The Workers League and the *Bulletin* played prominent roles in every major strike in this period, winning many prominent strike leaders as party members, including Ron May, a PATCO air traffic control leader who was thrown into federal prison by the Reagan administration for engaging in the “illegal strike.”

May wrote the introduction for the pamphlet authored by David North on the Phelps Dodge strike titled “Class War at Phelps Dodge.”

“Class War at Phelps Dodge” sold widely in the working class across all industries. Forty years after the strike, the pamphlet retains immense political value. It is a moving account of an American labor battle and gives the reader a close proximity to the events themselves. But more than this, “Class War at Phelps Dodge” catalogs the fight of the Trotskyist movement to politically mobilize the working class against the global social counterrevolution of the 1980s at a time when its catastrophic outcome—ultimately forced through by the AFL-CIO—was by no means inevitable.

We reproduce the interview with Jorge O’Leary below, edited for brevity.

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Eric London: I’d like to begin by asking you about the strike at Phelps Dodge that began in 1983. Many of our readers are young socialists who

were not alive at the time of the strike. It was an international news story at the time on account of the violence used by the company and the state of Arizona against strikers and due to the determination of the strikers. What was the strike about? Who was involved?

Jorge O'Leary: Morenci [Arizona] is a company town. It's a mining town, and it's not even on the map. The seat of the county is in Clifton, Arizona, but Morenci doesn't show in the map because it's a mine. But it's a mining town. It's in the east part of the state of Arizona close to the border with New Mexico.

In the state of Arizona there are several copper mines which had all been part of Mexico when Mexico was the owner of this part of the country, before it was forced to sell 26 percent of the state of Arizona [in the 1854 Gadsden Purchase following the US invasion of Mexico from 1846–48]. They put the Southwestern Pacific Railroad and they knew how much copper the state of Arizona had.

Phelps Dodge is the name of the mining company who owns the mining rights of many places in the world, including Chile, including South Africa, including Australia and including of course the United States, some places in Montana and several places here in Arizona and Texas. In 1914 or 1910, I don't remember exactly the date, there was a movement mostly of Anglo and Mexican miners in Douglas, Arizona. At the time the company asked for the National Guard and sent all these miners to the desert in New Mexico and they were dumped there. There were two or three hundred. And it was the beginning of the working-class movement in the mines of the state of Arizona. [This refers to the Bisbee Deportation. In 1917, Phelps Dodge and the US Army detained 1,300 striking miners in concentration camps in Arizona and New Mexico.]

In 1946, a union was formed in Morenci, and it was founded mostly for Mexican people who didn't have any rights. The mining company was founded in 1886, and all the time they brought miners from Mexico because here in the US there was not a workforce that knew how to mine, and Mexico had been mining for 500 years, so many from the south of Mexico and north of Mexico came to work in Morenci.

With the union things started changing. Every three years they signed a new contract and there was a little strike every three years, but everyone knew it would be resolved. The unions helped the workers in their own way at this time.

In 1983, I read some articles in the national press about Ronald Reagan, who hated unions. *Newsweek* said the company Phelps Dodge was getting ready for a long strike. I was a doctor there, and I went to a union meeting and it was full. There were 600 or 700 people there, there was the steelworkers union, and they allowed me to speak. I told them that the union was used to having a strike every three years with little things and then a settlement. But I told them this is different. They aren't going to settle this strike.

I think on June the 1st [the strike actually began on the night of June 30th/July 1st], the 14 unions went on strike, June of 1983. Then we had a long struggle with the company, with the police, with the National Guard. Dave [North] also knows those details as good as I do. We were on strike with the help of our women, mostly Mexican-American women. If it weren't for them the strike wouldn't have lasted as long as we lasted. We lasted three years on strike. We were isolated, the international unions, they didn't really help that much, they didn't help, really. One time in 1984 they gave 100 turkeys for Thanksgiving, that was the "help." Can you believe it?

The international unions from over there, from Chicago, from New York or whatever, they were not very interested in this strike. They knew the company hated the union. So, after many struggles of men and women, we lost. They settled, they acknowledged that the company won the strike. After three years we were on the picket lines, and the workers never failed, they were good, they supported the strike.

In any event, finally they started scabbing, people from all over the

United States, they paid the scabs more than what they were paying regular [workers] before the strike. They increased their salaries, whatever was needed. So people wanted work and many people from Oklahoma—mostly rednecks to be honest—came and didn't even know how to mine but the company started working, and we lost the strike. There are many things that happened. Dave was here almost from the first day, with Larry [Porter], and they helped us a lot. The *Bulletin* helped continuously with information, with all kinds of whatever they could do for us they did, and I am very thankful to Dave for that.

EL: You were a doctor at the Phelps Dodge Morenci Hospital, which was a company hospital, but during the strike you were fired. How did this happen?

JO: I started going to the picket lines whenever I could. I had a motorcycle, and I went and everybody knew me, and everybody was happy because the town doctor was backing them up, a Mexican. And that's when I became involved, that's when management asked me to quit doing that and quit going to the picket line and not talking to the media. Of course, I didn't obey, and they fired me. They gave me a hand-delivered letter saying that I was fired. So I cleaned out an old hayfeed store and put my office there. And then I started working, and mostly I didn't charge people, and we were happy to help. I don't regret one moment of the strike.

EL: Before you were fired, you were told by the company that you couldn't provide health care for striking miners and their children. Could you talk a little about that?

JO: This is correct. The medical rights were suspended for the striking community. And I was on call in the emergency room, and a little six- or seven-year-old kid came with a 103.4 [degree fever], and I wanted to take care of him and the nurse who was in charge in the ER told me that we couldn't do that because the company suspended the medical rights. I was on call, and I said I will keep seeing these patients, it doesn't matter if they have rights or not, I'm a doctor and I need to see people when they are sick. Well, the same day or the next day I was fired because I kept seeing patients. The company said the hospital was on the company grounds, they owned the ground that I was stepping on, they owned my medical office, they owned the light, electricity, that they owned the water. They said, even when you go to the bathroom, Dr. O'Leary, it's with Phelps Dodge money. And I said no, this is my work. In any event, I was fired, and I started working in Clifton and I worked there for three years.

EL: The actual termination letter, from mine manager John Bolles, says you were supporting the strike "through public appearances and statements," and concluded, "It is not appropriate for us to condone your inflammatory behavior by continuing you in our employ." How did you come to frighten the company so much?

JO: Essentially, with my knowledge of how Reagan was against unions and that they didn't have any intentions to settle the strike, and I said without the workers, the mines cannot work. They didn't like what I was saying, and they fired me. They also knew it was against the law to stop me from seeing patients in the ER, so they couldn't say that.

EL: Can you talk a bit more about the role of the Democratic Party in this strike? This was when the union busting Ronald Reagan was president, but at the time Arizona had a Democratic governor, Bruce Babbitt, right? What did the strikers call him?

JO: Scabbitt! His last name was Babbitt, but we called him Scabbitt. The governor said we have to follow the law, and there was injunction but the judge said there couldn't be more than 10 people in the picket line, so they were taking sides right away. You don't have a picket line if you let the scabs get in, you lose the strike that way. We held our picket lines until this judge made the injunction and we moved the picket line to Clifton to stop the scabs from coming to the mine.

To get to the mine you have to go through Clifton. And also the people

in Clifton were workers, miners. So we held the picket line there, and we had before us the scabs and the police. The scabs couldn't get through until they sent the National Guard. We were nonviolent. We were vocal, were nasty, calling the scabs names, and that's when they started building a new road before the entrance of Clifton. They had machinery and they built a road before getting to Clifton so they could get in through the back road.

They sent soldiers, tanks, big trucks, helicopters and planes. It was revolution—they were intimidating. When we went on the picket line, that's when the National Guard and the police came and chased everybody out and beat them up, and it was really sad to see that.

You might have a picture where this guy was naked before the soldiers and police and he had his hands open on the side like the cross, saying "we are peaceful." And when many of the national news media came to Clifton, some of them were nice. But some of them were poisoning our minds. The local paper, for example, was owned by the company. The one who truly helped was Dave.

EL: Can you tell me about when your relationship with the *Bulletin* and with Dave began?

JO: Oh, our relationship was very good all the time. He was welcome at home and he came and had lunch or stayed to sleep at the house a couple of times. They came and we had good relations all the time, we felt the support of his intelligence, and he is very intelligent. I admire him very much.

EL: So what kind of work did you two do together during the strike?

JO: He interviewed workers and did articles about the strike. For instance, he got information that Sumitomo, a Japanese company, was interested in buying Phelps Dodge at the time, and he made an article about Sumitomo, which was during the war against the US they built submarines and now they were selling [products] with the earnings of the war. Anyway, the information that he knew or he advised me in many [ways as to how] to view [the situation]. I had some experience from Mexico from when I was a student, but to become the leader of the strike, he helped me.

EL: What was the relationship between the workers and the *Bulletin* and Workers League?

JO: The strikers saw in Dave a friend, in a particular way. Many of the workers were Catholic and believed if you are socialist, you are atheist. Most of the strikers were Catholic people. Greenlee County [where Morenci is located] has the highest number of soldiers in the nation [per capita]. It was not North Carolina or South Carolina, it was Greenlee County. Every high school guy went to the army. Ninety percent of them. So they are in that way conservative, and you know how the national media say that Russia and the communists don't believe in God, and things like that.

So workers were very cautious at first. They were nice to Dave and knew that he was right. Some of them thanked the *Bulletin* for the help and orientation, and information about Phelps Dodge itself, including many things that they didn't know, including me. They knew he was right. They knew how the strike was going and the general unions were not helping that much, they were betraying our strike. They did betray, because at the same time they were going to have a strike in New Mexico and El Paso, Texas, and they settled those. They betrayed Morenci because if it's a bigger mine we were isolated, and it was easier for the company to squash us with the governor and the money.

EL: At one point you were called east by the trade union leaders. Can you describe what happened?

JO: I went to Lebanon, New Jersey, with Angel Rodriguez. He was the president of the steelworkers [union]. And they [the union leaders] told me the strike didn't look too good, that there were 358 strikes around the country and that we shouldn't believe we were the most important. But we *were*, because we were 1,500 miners, and they tried to cool off the

situation and I said, well, why did you keep negotiating for three years until our strike was lost? They said, well, we cannot win all the strikes. They said we win most of the strikes—I don't know if its true or not—but we don't win all of them. And, they said, "Phelps Dodge strike was partially won because we settled in New Mexico and in Texas," and they told us, "you were the losing part." And they gave some money to the steelworkers union and they offered me some money. I told them to send it to the strike fund, because taking it would be eating with the blood of my brothers.

They tried to pay me off because I think they believed that I could become a problem for them. You know, talking to the national media. I don't know why, some of the unions wanted for me to be the governor of Arizona. I don't have the knowledge of money or anything, so I said forget about it. The guys over there in the north, whatever, the bosses of the unions, when I went to this hotel in Lebanon, New Jersey, it was luxury hotel. All these cars arrived to talk to me and to Angel [Rodriguez], they wanted me to be there. They were in Cadillacs, all of them. I was outside just waiting for them and they were all in limousines and Cadillacs, like in *The Godfather*.

We were told the strike was over, and they were trying to get jobs to some people here and there. They offered to me to be a boss of the University of New Mexico, and they gave me a contract for two years, and I said, "I do not qualify to be medical director of the department of family practice." Maybe I could have done it, but there are other doctors who are better. And so I declined. I decided to keep working as a doctor. They offered me some money.

I was offered \$175,000 [\$417,000 in 2021 dollars] to sell out the strike. I declined and said to send it to the strike fund. They did not do that. Forget it!

EL: That's a remarkable story. Can you talk more about how the AFL-CIO isolated your strike?

JO: Well, I thought they could have put more pressure nationally. I made an article about it that called for a national strike because otherwise the unions will disappear. I said the unions will disappear if we lose this strike and everybody should go on strike, and Arizona should go on strike. They [the national trade union leaders] told me it was impossible because we will be breaking the law. And I told them, "*They* are breaking the law already!"

They said we have contracts, we can't go on a national strike. And they didn't want to do that. The governor wanted to run for president of the United States, and they asked me in the press about this. I told them he never will be president because he betrayed the working class. He betrayed the workers of Clifton and Morenci and it will be the shame of the unions to support somebody who defeats the strike.

EL: Can you tell us about your personal and political background? You were born in 1940 in Nogales, Mexico, when Lázaro Cárdenas was president of Mexico and Leon Trotsky was living in exile in the Mexico City colonia of Coyoacán. Later, you graduated from UNAM in Mexico City. Were you politically involved in Mexico?

JO: Lázaro Cárdenas was very powerful, he was president from 1934 to 1940. But he was very popular in Mexico, the most popular president we had after [Benito] Juárez [president of Mexico from 1858–72]. So, during the Bay of Pigs—the Bahía de Cochinos—we, the students, we had a meeting at the Zócalo. And so we were there and I was in a group called Brazil 9. That was a socialist group, but we were only about 20 people, and we didn't know who our boss was, so if the police beat us up, we couldn't give any information. We worked in "cells."

I was in that group, but my ideas were socialistic since President Cárdenas was a socialistic president and I love him very much. And I met him at that meeting in the Zócalo. At that meeting I was next to him, and there were almost 150,000 to 300,000 people. And I was just like I am here, I was next to him. They pulled the microphone, and I told the

president we are with you, you are our hero. When he tried to speak at the megaphone, they cut the electricity.

But regardless, he spoke. And everybody listened. Can you imagine 150,000 or 300,000 people in complete silence? Well, we were in silence because he was speaking. It's the truth. I talked to him, and it was during the Bay of Pigs and we offered to go to Cuba. We were supposed to take the train to Yucatán and cross the channel to support Fidel. And the train was stopped, we were students—all of us, we were students... We were free to go [to Cuba], until I guess somebody called a general and 100 of us were in the train and they stopped the train. We said, "No, we are supporting our president Lázaro Cárdenas." And they didn't like it too much that we called him the president because for us he was still our president. [Cárdenas had ceased being president in 1940. Adolfo López Mateos was president of Mexico at the time of the Bay of Pigs in 1961.]

...[Cárdenas] sent word that we should return or we will be detained in Mérida and that the army was not going to let us cross because it would put us in trouble with the United States. And then we returned to Mexico City.

EL: How do you look back on this experience nearly 40 years after the strike?

JO: I'm happy that my wife and I supported the strike. She was very supportive of me and she is an educated person. She is an anthropologist. I was very happy that Dave gave help.

EL: Is there anything you would add to young members of the Socialist Equality Party today?

JO: The *Bulletin*, through Dave North, gave us a lot of information for our benefit. Not for the benefit of the governor or the company. He was honest, and we trust him. I told Dave that some of his political views are different from mine, but essentially we are for the working class. And that I will trust whatever he says. If he says something to me, I will say, "That's correct."

They should let you speak wherever you are. Tell workers the truth, that you want for the workers not to be begging for a better living. They have their right to have a good life, to improve humanity. And I think you have for instance this guy Trump, we were disgraced with him, he is a Nazi.

Any revolution or social change will bring threats. Police came to harass me. One Vietnam veteran policeman said, "You fucking doctor, we will get you. We shoot people like crazy, we don't care who they are."

I am 80 years old and I still am for the revolution, but I am home now, I have arthritis. I won't be here too long, but my views haven't changed. I am not as active as I would like to be, and I'm sorry that we lost the strike, but we never betrayed the people. We fought shoulder to shoulder with the workers. And I'm proud to talk in front of my children. One time, my daughter went to the university and they called her name for attendance. The professor said, "Isn't your father Dr. O'Leary?" She said, "Yes," and then all the students, 200–300 of them, all the students stood up and applauded. I feel gratified.



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