

1,300 copper mine workers in Utah prepare for struggle against Rio Tinto

Jessica Goldstein, Jerry White
30 March 2022

Are you a Rio Tinto mine worker? Contact us to describe the issues in your struggle.

The five-year labor agreement for 1,300 workers at Rio Tinto's Kennecott Bingham Canyon mine and refining facility in Utah is set to expire at midnight Thursday, March 31. The mine and smelting operation, 25 miles southwest of Salt Lake City, includes one of the largest open-pit copper mines in the world, also known as the "richest hole on earth."

Earlier this month, rank-and-file workers, who include heavy-equipment operators, line operators and maintenance workers, rejected a contract proposal backed by the United Steelworkers (USW), the International Union of Operating Engineers, the International Association of Machinists and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

The deal included annual raises of 4 percent in the first year and 3 percent in years two through five--far below the current rate of inflation. It also maintained substandard wage and benefits for new hires and insufficient paid time off for workers on exhausting work schedules. Workers want substantial wage increases to protect them from the sharp rise in living costs in the Wasatch Front, the metropolitan region in the north-central part of Utah. Housing prices have jumped 23.6 percent in Salt Lake County, with the median single-family home selling for \$580,000 in February. Average gas prices in the state are \$4.43 a gallon, 20 cents higher than the national average.

"This is our livelihood, and we want a fair deal to better provide for our families," David Gearhart, a smelter worker with 17 years at Kennecott, told ABC4-TV in Salt Lake City, "We want to be able to go on vacation and not just live to work. We've sacrificed a lot over the last two years of the pandemic to keep Kennecott making copper and making money. We just want to be shown appreciation for that. They called us 'essential employees' in 2020, we'll show it now," he said, adding that workers were prepared to strike if no deal was reached by the deadline.

"Now, they're not worth anything," the worker's wife, Rene, added. "My husband was sick, and he was in the ICU.

And they caught it at work. He got deathly ill, and so did I. It was terrible, I didn't know if he was going to live or die," she told the ABC4 reporter.

Rio Tinto, which bought Kennecott Utah Copper's assets in 1989, is a massive UK- and Australian-based multinational corporation and the world's second-largest metals and mining corporation. The company made \$21 billion in profits last year, more than doubling its 2020 profits. The price of copper, a key metal for energy generation, transmission, and storage, including for the rapidly expanding electric vehicle battery production, has risen from \$2.19 a pound on March 30, 2020, to \$4.74 on Monday.

The Kennecott mine, which opened in 1906, produces nearly 20 percent of the US's copper production, as well as gold and silver. Rio Tinto is also recovering previously overlooked minerals from mining sludge, including rhenium, tellurium and bismuth, which are used in products ranging from smartphones and solar panels to jet engines and military explosives.

Last September, Rio Tinto CEO Jakob Stausholm met with Biden administration officials involved in securing critical mineral supply and countering the domination of China, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Mine workers face dangerous and deadly conditions daily from heavy machinery, including giant trucks and shovels, and in the smelting and refining areas. In 2017, Albert Lozano, 64, died after exposure to sulphur dioxide while working at the Garfield smelter.

There a long history of bitter class conflict at the Kennecott's Utah operations, including a bitter strike of largely Greek immigrant workers led by the Western Federation of Miners in 1912. On Sept. 19, 1912, the *Salt Lake Tribune* reported, "With 800 foreign strikers armed with rifles and revolvers strongly entrenched in the precipitous mountain ledges across the canyon from the Utah Copper Mine raking the mine workings with a hail of lead at every attempt of railroad employees or deputy sheriffs to enter the grounds, the strike situation has reached

its initial crisis.”

Despite efforts to pit immigrant workers against each other, including by using strikebreakers from Mexico in 1912, the workforce consolidated into a powerful force including workers of all races and nationalities. Significant strikes, led by the left-wing International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (IUMMS) and involving large numbers of Mexican-American workers, erupted at Kennecott’s operations in Utah, New Mexico and Arizona in 1948, 1955 and 1964.

The United Steelworkers union waged a Cold War anti-communist campaign against the IUMMS and absorbed its membership in the 1960s. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the USW abandoned any resistance to the corporations and adopted the corporatist doctrine of labor–management partnership, which led the destruction of the jobs of hundreds of thousands of steelworkers and copper miners.

The isolation and defeat of the bitter 1983–1984 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 Arizona’s 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.

More recently, the USW and other unions have been involved in the isolation and betrayal of the six-month lockout of 780 Rio Tinto Alcan aluminum smelter workers in Alma, Quebec, in 2011–2012; 1,300 Asarco copper miners in Arizona and Texas in 2020; 900 Rio Tinto aluminum smelting workers in British Columbia in 2021; and the two-month strike by 2,400 workers at Vale Inco’s nickel, copper, cobalt and precious mining complex in Sudbury, Ontario. In each case, the unions collaborated in rolling back wages, pensions and working conditions, which were won through generations of struggle.

Rio Tinto management is depending on the USW to block a strike and string out workers well past the contract expiration before pushing through another pro-company contract. As company spokeswoman Lita Diesley told the *Tribune*, “Rio Tinto has a positive track record with unions and that there hasn’t been a Kennecott strike in decades.”

If workers compel the unions to strike, then the USW will do everything it can to isolate the striking workers, starve them into submission and force them to accept concessions that benefit the company and the union officials, from the local to the international, who would help Rio Tinto to impose these concessions.

That is just what the USW has done to 30,000 oil refinery

and petrochemical workers who were also prepared to strike. USW President Tom Conway extended the contract for more than three weeks after the February 1 deadline and then suddenly announced a four-year sellout deal, which includes a 2.5 percent raise in the first year and an average annual wage increase of 3 percent, far below the rate of inflation, now running at a 40-year high of 7.9 percent. The deal was announced three days after Conway met with President Biden and top energy and Defense Department officials and agreed to block any strike that could disrupt the administration’s plans to ramp up its military confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. Meanwhile, the oil industry is reaping record profits through price-gouging.

Workers at the Chevron refinery in Richmond, California, revolted, however, and voted down two USW-backed contracts, forcing the USW to call a strike, which it is now working to isolate. The USW is not paying a penny in benefits from its multimillion-dollar “Strike & Defense Fund,” even though it controls \$1.5 in assets and pays Conway a salary over \$221,000 plus perks. There are no press releases on the union’s website about the struggles under way in California and Utah.

There is enormous support for a concerted fight back in the working class. The last two years of the pandemic have seen 1 million people needlessly die in the US due to the prioritizing of profit over human life by the corporate and political establishment. At the same time, the corporations and billionaires have never done better. Runaway inflation is driving workers into struggle to defend their livelihoods and millions are opposed to another war for the giant oil corporations and banks.

To unite with the growing wave of struggles, Rio Tinto workers must take the conduct of their fight out of the hands of the USW and other pro-company unions and join the growing number of workers who are building rank-and-file workplace committees to fight for the demands they need, not what the corporate executives and union bureaucrats say is affordable.

Mine workers who want to prepare a real struggle and build an independent committee to link up with other workers in a national strike against the energy, metals and mining giants should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact