

As Asarco copper workers continue their fight, unions isolate their struggle

By Jessica Goldstein
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Striking Asarco copper mine workers on strike in Arizona and their families are resorting to food banks, community health clinics, and donation centers to survive as the strike continues into its second week.

The United Steelworkers union (USW) which organizes the majority of workers at Asarco pays only up to \$225 per week in strike benefits from its strike and defense fund, which “currently exceeds \$150 million” according to the USW website, but likely holds more than \$350 million. Workers cannot even begin to collect this poverty ration until the fourth week of the strike.

As a consequence, workers face concerns that they will not be able to keep up with housing payments, grocery and utility bills, and that they and their families may go without necessary medical care. Workers will lose their employer-paid health benefits soon, according to local press reports.

Other unions involved in the strike, such as the United Auto Workers (UAW), the Teamsters and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), are also forcing workers onto starvation rations while sitting on multiple millions in their strike funds. The Teamsters, for example, does not require that every local pay strike benefits to workers at all. The UAW is currently starving 48,000 General Motors workers on strike across the US with weekly strike pay of just \$275 per week while sitting on an \$800 million strike fund.

The doling out of grossly inadequate strike assistance is part of the strategy by the unions aimed at starving workers into submission and pressuring them to accept a sellout contract tailored to the needs of Grupo Mexico, the Mexico-based mining and metals conglomerate that owns and operates Asarco mines located in Arizona and Texas.

News reports of the hardships facing strikers drew angry and incredulous comments from workers in online posts.

One writes, “I thought unions were supposed to take care of them while on strike. What’s the point of paying all those dues?”

Another said, “Didn't the union say they were going to help with all of that 'based on need' in one of your reports last week? I'd say if they're working to support the Union, then the Union should be supporting them, otherwise why are they paying dues every single paycheck?”

Another worker expressed the militancy of the strikers in the face of threats of starvation and other losses: “Brandon Cobbs I am a striking miner at ASARCO. I want to work, but I also want to be treated fairly. No wage increase, not even a cost of living in 10 years. Several years ago our insurance cost was raised 100% and now they want to raise it another 250%. I've worked for this company for 13 years in November and my pension will be frozen. These are a few of the things this company [demands] which regularly profits between \$1.3 billion and \$1.7 a year. This is NOT being treated fairly. We are striking for a fair contract.”

Asarco is demanding that workers forgo wage increases for an additional four years in the upcoming contract. The workers have already struggled for the past 10 years without raises. The company also demands a freeze on all existing pension plans and cuts to health benefits, including a doubling of out-of-pocket expenses that workers currently pay.

The company has refused to pay more than \$10 million in bonuses owed to workers hired since 2014, despite being ordered to do so by an arbitrator and in several court rulings. The bonuses were lost as part of a concessions contract pushed through with the aid of the

unions in 2011, which also cut pensions for workers hired in June of the same year.

These bonuses replaced the cost-of-living (COLA) increases lost after the betrayal of the bitter Phelps Dodge strike of 1983-1984 in Morenci, Arizona. The USW has done nothing to fight for copper mine workers who have been laid off by the thousands over decades while companies clawed back wages, benefits and bonuses owed to workers.

The USW is preparing once again to betray the mine workers and push through another company-friendly contract as it has done time and again, including the recent negotiations with the major US steel producers and oil refinery workers. Meanwhile, The union is refusing to shed light on details of the current negotiations.

Grupo Mexico released its third-quarter financial report on Wednesday. Its net consolidated profits of \$250 million equaled its profits in the same quarter last year. This is significant due to the decline in copper prices in the past year. In fact, the impact of lower prices was offset by increases in production in Mexico, Peru, and the US.

Once again, the USW is whipping up anti-Mexican nationalism to divert the anger of workers, blaming “executives in Mexico City” for the attacks on workers, as if a US-based firm would not be equally brutal in its contempt for workers interests.

The nationality of the owners does not alter the fact that the USW collaborates with management in order to drive down wages and labor costs in the name of global competitiveness.

Asarco mine workers confront not only a ruthless management, but the thoroughly rotten trade union organizations.

A striking Asarco worker wrote a message to the *World Socialist Web Site* in support of expanding the strike. “I think it would be great to expand. For all unions to stand and support each other. Everyone is affected when we are not able to feed our families under the same wages we’re used to making. There are power in numbers, but we must continue to stand strong and support each other.”

To win their struggle workers must break out of the straitjacket imposed by the unions and reject their nationalist and pro-corporate framework.

Workers at Asarco need to organize rank-and-file

committees to take control of their struggle. They need to hold democratic discussions to decide and put forth their own demands, which can include but are not limited to:

- * \$750 per week in strike pay
- * An immediate 40 percent wage increase for all workers and restoration of COLA
- * Fully funded health care and pension benefits for all workers
- * Rank-and-file workers’ oversight of all negotiations between the company and unions and contract voting process
- * A return to the eight-hour work day and restoration of thousands of lost jobs
- * Election of rank-and-file safety committees in the mines to oversee all health, safety and environmental measures needed to protect workers
- * Ample funding for research and development of safe mining and extraction techniques, and equipment that will end the risks to workers’ lives and health

The strike of some 1,800 Asarco mine workers is a part of a global upsurge in working-class struggles as the world capitalist crisis intensifies, expressed in part by the growing strike movements erupting throughout Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The task of rank-and-file committees is to establish links between these struggles in a unified global movement.

The fight of copper mine workers is in essence a political struggle, pitting workers against an entire capitalist class intent on deepening the exploitation of workers. To win their fight workers need a conscious international political strategy based on the fight for socialism, the reorganization of economic life in the interests of production for human need, not private profit.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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