
Victory for Southwest copper miners
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TUCSON, Ariz. — Four long months of holding the picket line have ended in victory for copper strikers in three mines, a concentrator and a smelter in this state and a refinery in Amarillo, Texas.

Union members voted overwhelmingly to ratify a new 14-month contract with Asarco after the company retreated from its demands for pension and health care cuts. The new contract also includes the successorship clause the union insisted upon. Under this clause, the company, which filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy during the strike, agreed that any potential buyer of the Asarco unit must recognize the union and negotiate a labor agreement prior to a sale.

Striking copper workers had maintained 24-hour pickets since early July. Asarco's union-busting tactics, besides the bankruptcy filing, included sending threatening letters to workers and hiring scabs.

International solidarity between the United Steelworkers, the lead union in the strike, and its Latin American sister unions was key to bringing this victory about, according to José Ángel Rocha Pérez, a leader of the Mexican miners union SNTMMSRM. Prior to the beginning of the strike in early July, the United Steelworkers, the SNTMMSRM and the Federation of Workers of the Mine and Metal Industries of Peru (FETIMAP) all participated in a Global Solidarity Day of protests against transnational conglomerate Grupo Mexico. Grupo México owns Asarco, Minera México and Southern Peru Copper.

Thousands of members of the SNTMMSRM staged one-hour work stoppages last August in support of both the strikers at Asarco in the U.S. and striking steelworkers at Sicartsa in Mexico.

The contract won by the strikers at Asarco shows that unity brings about power, according to Rocha. This power gives hope to the people and will not allow enterprises to do as they please at the cost of their workers, Rocha told the World in a phone interview.

Support for the strike also came from a wide variety of community and labor forces. In the Hayden/Kearny area of Arizona, where three of the Asarco properties are located, a local teachers union did one-hour stints on the picket line with the strikers. Honks, waves and donations of food and drink were common.

Strikers at the Silverbell Mine outside of Tucson were joined on the line every Friday by the local Jobs with Justice coalition. "No one is isolated in struggle," said Steve Valencia, chair of Tucson JwJ.

U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) walked the picket line in solidarity with the strikers. He gathered the signatures of 44 other members of the U.S. House of Representatives on his letter urging Asarco to bargain in good faith with the unions. AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Linda Chavez-Thompson spoke at a community rally organized by the AFL-CIO included representatives of the University of Arizona Young Democrats, the Green Party, the Center for Biological Diversity, immigrant rights group Derechos Humanos, several local unions, and the religious community. The Tucson chapter of Food Not Bombs brought food donations for the strikers.

The strike "sends a very strong message that unions are alive and well in the copper industry," USW negotiator Manny Armenta told Reuters.

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