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PHELPS-DODGE COPPER STRIKE: MORE THAN A CONTRACT AT STAKE

[by William Segal]

"We have survived ten long months of being stripped of our human dignity and human rights, and yet we know that we must continue to be strong . . . We are no longer fighting a strike against one company. We are fighting for our rights—our union's and our survival. We must keep the labor movement strong. We must not let the Phelps-Dodges of America become our dictators.

"Remember that after today's rally we will still be here struggling. Don't leave us to do battle alone. Listen and realize that if we lose, we will be setting the pattern for what happens to every working man and woman in America. Join us in the happiness of victory or share in the sorrow of defeat."

--Connie Ornelas, Stafford Arizona Miners Women's Auxiliary, May 5, 1984

For one full year now, 2200 predominantly Chicano workers at five copper mines in Arizona and New Mexico have been on strike against the Phelps-Dodge Corporation. The strikers, most of them members of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), originally walked off their jobs over a contract dispute, but by now much more is at stake. The outcome of this strike may well determine the future of the union movement in the Southwest.

The Phelps-Dodge strikers have fought an uphill battle all the way. The company hired strikebreakers a month after the strike began, and the National Guard has been called out twice. A devastating flood last October wiped out many strikers' homes.

It would be easy to conclude that the strike, and the workers, have been defeated. But recent visitors to the copper fields relate that the struggle is still very much alive.

Company Demands— In the wake of the 1981-82 recession, world copper prices fell by 40%. With 90% of its domestic earnings coming from copper and copper products, Phelps-Dodge (PD) finished 1982 in the red for the first time in fifty years. It often cites these economic difficulties as the justification for its hardline stance on labor negotiations.

But if the company was hurting at the time of contract negotiations, the workers were hurting far worse. When copper prices fall, a company can just leave the copper in the ground. But in several isolated Southwestern communities, PD is virtually the only employer in town. You can work for PD or not work at all.

When PD's labor contracts expired in 1983, a third of its employees were on layoff, and the company evidently decided that the time was right to bust the union. In copper industry collective bargaining negotiations earlier that year, management representatives had demanded, and won, a three-year wage freeze. But in a sudden break from the industry pattern it had followed for years, PD insisted on elimination of the COLA clause, drastic cuts in health, retirement and vacation benefits, and a 10% pay cut for new hires. The union had little choice but to strike.

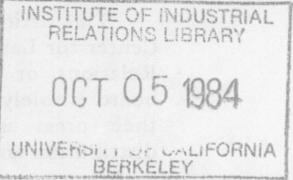
PD is a powerful multinational corporation, with a far-flung empire extending from Arizona to El Salvador, from the Phillipines to South Africa. The company plays hardball in everything it does, prompting lawsuits by state and federal agencies alleging unpaid taxes, illegal sulfur dioxide emissions, and anti-trust violations, to mention just a few. PD has thrown all it's got against the strikers. Last Christmas, for example, PD announced it would evict strikers from company-owned housing in Morenci, Arizona, where its largest mine is located.

The company has also received timely assistance from law enforcement authorities. For example when PD re-opened its Morenci mine with "permanent replacements" last August, National Guardsmen were there, equipped with automatic rifles, tear gas, helicopters and armored personnel carriers.

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Workers' Resistance—But an overwhelming proportion of union members continues to respect picket lines. As a result, the company must train hundreds of unskilled, inexperienced strikebreakers how to operate the heavy equipment used in today's open-pit copper mines. Many strikebreakers are bused in from a distance of more than a hundred miles each day.

As a consequence, PD suffered a \$64 million loss last year. In contrast, its chief competitors reported hefty profits after signing the union contract. Indeed, the company might have been forced back to the bargaining table long ago if it were not for its South African subsidiary, Black Mountain Mining, Ltd., which generated nearly half of PD's worldwide 1981 earnings.

Part of what keeps the Morenci strikers going is the knowledge that they don't really have the option of backing down. If these workers fail to get their old jobs back, they and their families will have to travel hundreds of miles before they work again.

Catalina Chavez, co-chair of the Arizona Copper Strikers Solidarity Tour, said that when she went to visit the strikers in early May, "The first thing that hit me was that most of the people on the picket line were women—old women, young women, women with their babies." Made up of wives, sisters, mothers and daughters of striking workers, the Morenci Miners Women's Auxiliary distributes donations of money, food and clothing, and also walks the picket lines. These women have kept the families, and the strike, alive.

Another important factor is the rich history of struggle of Chicano workers in the Southwest. The copper mines were first opened over a hundred years ago, and then as now, the miners were overwhelmingly Mexican and Chicano. Fina Roman, President of the Morenci Miners Women's Auxiliary, explains that there's far more than a contract at stake here, "PD wants to take our jobs away, wants to kick us out of this town. No, we are not leaving. This town was built by our ancestors. Three generations have fought PD. We are not going to give up!"

The PD strikers know what it was like before they had a union. "Does Phelps-Dodge really expect us to sit back and watch four generations of blood, sweat and tears obliterated?" asks Connie Ornelas. "To do this would set us back seventy years in time, when our ancestors were herded into cattle cars, taken to the desert and left to die."

The incident she refers to is the Bisbee deportation of 1917, when 1200 striking copper miners were forced into boxcars at gunpoint, then abandoned in the New Mexico desert without food or water.

Labor's Support is Essential—Today, the copper fields are among the few places in the Southwest where Chicanos enjoy union wages and working conditions. But in July, decertification proceedings against the unions representing PD workers can legally begin. If the unions are thrown out, this could be a crushing blow to the entire union movement in the Southwest.

In PD the copper strikers have taken on a formidable adversary. But the unity of small southwestern mining communities like Morenci may yet prove too much for this copper giant, provided they receive the support of the labor movement. The battle is not yet over, but by the end of the summer a victor may well emerge.

--William Segal

THE MORENCI MINERS WOMEN'S AUXILIARY WILL BE TOURING CALIFORNIA AND THE SOUTHWEST IN THE LAST TWO WEEKS OF JUNE TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR THE STRIKE. FOR INFORMATION, CALL 415/387-7425 (SAN FRANCISCO), 213/280-2074 (LOS ANGELES), OR 303/480-0325 (DENVER).

THE PHELPS DODGE STRIKERS ARE RAISING FUNDS THROUGH THE STRIKE RELIEF FUND, C/O ANGEL RODRIQUEZ, USWA, P.O. BOX 1017, CLIFTON, ARIZONA 85533; AND MORENCI MINERS WOMEN'S AUXILIARY, C/O FINA ROMAN, PRESIDENT, 1113 THIRD AVENUE, SAFFORD, ARIZONA 85546.

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