

November 2, 2005

HONDURAS: workers strike at Glamis gold mining operation

Workers of the Canadian transnational mining corporation Glamis Gold maintained their strike for a week, paralyzing the San Martín gold mine in the Siria Valley, Honduras, to denounce violations to their collective contract, lay-offs, and grave health problems.

Please re-distribute, re-publish, etc. If you want on-off this elist: info@rightsaction.org. To support community based groups in Honduras working on development, enviro- and HR issues related to Glamis Gold, see info at bottom.

===

FELLOW MINE WORKERS: SICK AND FIRED BUT FIGHTING BACK

by Sandra Cuffe, Rights Action, Honduras, November 1, 2005

From Tuesday October 25 until early this morning, the organized workers of Minerales Entre Mares de Honduras, S.A., a subsidiary of Canadian transnational corporation Glamis Gold Ltd., went on strike, occupying the entry and exit points of the San Martín open pit gold mine and paralyzing mining activity.

The Entre Mares de Honduras S.A. Workers' Union (SITRAMEMHSA) took action to demand that workers' rights be respected, denouncing a series of violations of their collective contract, lay-offs, and grave health problems.

Only a few days before the action began, the Union had celebrated its first anniversary. The organization has some 190 members of the approximately 260 people in total working at the San Martín mine, which is located in the municipality of San Ignacio, department of Francisco Morazan, two hours north of Tegucigalpa.

SITRAMEMHSA and Entre Mares/Glamis Gold signed a collective contract on September 16, 2005, although the contract came into effect on September 1, according to the signed document. According to the workers present at the occupation of the main gate to the mine, the company is violating clauses 1, 2, 8, 11 and 15, dealing with numerous labour rights.

"How is it possible that we tolerate all of these situations? If we signed our collective contract not even two months ago and already they're turning it upside down?" asked Daniel Martínez, president of SITRAMEMHSA. "We do not allow this, we will not allow it, because if it's not now, then later they'll do whatever they please with us."

The workers maintained their occupation of both of the San Martín mine's entrance and exit points. They explained that all of the Glamis Gold executives are in a meeting in the United States and that there was no representative present who had the power to make decisions or negotiate. As of October 29, no government representatives had arrived either, neither from the Ministry of Labour nor Health, Environment or Human Rights officials.

COST REDUCTION: FIRING SICK WORKERS AND INCREASING CONTAMINATION

On Monday, October 24, there was a meeting between representatives of SITRAMEMHSA and Glamis Gold, supposedly to approve the loans of the rotating fund, a loan policy that had been brought into effect by the struggle of the union. Once gathered, the company suddenly announced that it had 27 lay-offs prepared for the following day. Among the 27 are David Flores, Victoriano Cruz and Francisco Hernández, all of whom have been suffering from illnesses and health problems in the course of their work at the mine.

"We cannot accept the firing of three fellow workers who have been receiving medical treatment for respiratory tract problems, stomach problems and problems in their bones," explained Martínez. "They worked in a critical area where there was the most contact with live cyanide."

All 27 fired workers laboured in the 'grinding' section, with the crushing machine and the conveyor belt system that transports the pulverized material from the machine to the lixiviation pools (also referred to as patios) full of cyanide solution. The union had been informed by the company that both the crushing machine and conveyor belt system will be removed and transported to Guatemala. Thus, at the San Martin mine, once the material is dynamited, the huge rocks will be transported in dump trucks directly to the patios. In fact, this process had already begun; the grinder was only being operated during one night shift.

"All they care about is bringing the mountain down, getting rid of the people and maintaining operations only in the areas of lixiviation, patio, laboratory..." denounced Martínez. "We ask that national and international authorities intervene so that the process will continue as it is set out in the company's mitigation plan."

The fired workers are not the only worrisome aspect of this change of procedure. There is also the risk that it may generate or increase contamination. As the workers pointed out on the map drawn of the mine site that hangs from the main gate, alongside the Honduran flag and a union banner, the dump trucks' path crosses a significant area of contaminated waste material. As the trucks descend to the lixiviation pools, their tires become impregnated with cyanide solution before returning along a stretch of road where the runoff from rains flows directly into the Guanijiquil stream.

Several workers present around the bend at the occupation of the second gate insisted that rainwater is not the only water that flows into the stream. They revealed that during a recent period of torrential downpours, the company was pumping water 24 hours a day from the so-called 'ducks' lagoon' to the Guanijiquil stream, which in turn feeds into the Playa river, one of the few water sources for irrigation in the valley that has not been completely usurped by the mining exploitation process. Not even the workers could confirm whether or not the lagoon contains cyanide or heavy metals. However, the lagoon - which was created a few months ago as the company retained a large quantity of water with no liner underneath - gets its name from the reported fact that when ducks settle down on the water, they die.

'I suffer from pain here...'

"They tell me that what I have might be due to my age, practically, the bones, that's what they maintain. But as you know, we've worked with cyanide, so I would like them to tell us the truth. If that's what it is, then we're all going downhill," worriedly expressed David Flores, one of the fired workers who have not recuperated from their health problems.

"I suffer from pain here in the coccyx and in the bones... And I'm worried that they'll toss me out and I'll be going pretty much good just for collecting firewood. And not just me, but also I look at my fellow workers, maybe even all of us, and my family."

Another fired worker, Victoriano Cruz, is facing similar problems. In even worse conditions is Francisco Hernández, another of the 27 workers all laid off from the same department - those who worked with the crushing machine and the conveyor belt system. Hernández has worked 12-hour days for five and a half years in this same department. Aside from the dangers of their daily toil, for which the workers receive only minimal protection such as disposable little facemasks, Hernández told of a serious accident he had in 2003 and of the numerous health problems he has faced since that time, reducing his capabilities both for work and for life in general.

"On one occasion, where I was working - because there you work with cyanide, there's live cyanide there - some tubing rebounded back at me and the solution poured over my entire body. I went to wash myself, because you have to bathe immediately. But from then until now I have felt ill. It started with dizziness and vomiting."

"Since last May, a pain started in my legs and I couldn't walk. I went to Tegucigalpa, I went to see the doctor. The doctor [from the clinic in Tegucigalpa] told me that it was a problem caused by the chemicals here, and so they did tests and even sent one to the United States, the samples, you know. And two months later the test came back and [the doctors hired by the mining company] told me that no, that there wasn't anything wrong with me, that the test came back clean."

"So, with the medicine that the doctor was giving me here, the pain in my legs went away, not completely, but it has moved into my shoulders and I almost can't work. And now the doctors from the mine say that I don't have anything wrong with me. And I can't do anything - I can't lift my arms up, I can't even work what's mine anymore."

"I'm still going to the doctor, but I don't get better. But they still say that no, I don't have anything."

It is important to recall the words of then-manager of Entre Mares, Eduardo Villacorta, in an interview with Revistazo.com in 2003: "All that bit about cyanide is a big myth. Cyanide is no more dangerous than the baygon you use in your home to kill mosquitos."

Along the same lines, Francisco Hernández insists that the company never explained to the workers about the dangers of cyanide: "They never said it was harmful. We knew it was harmful because everyone said so. The thing is that you can feel it, you know, the contamination."

ILLEGAL DEDUCTIONS FOR MEDICAL ATTENTION AND HIDDEN RESULTS

Ever since the workers can remember, the company has never fulfilled its responsibility for the total coverage of their medical costs. The company used to deduct 20% of all medical bills directly from the workers' salaries. It was an important point during the negotiation of their collective contract, one that SITRAMEMHSA fought for, warning the company that they would

no longer permit workers to be billed for their health care.

"Clause number 11 is clear," declared Daniel Martínez. "It talks about the worker receiving 100% coverage in all those cases - accidents, professional and non-professional illnesses. They'll be covered 100%."

In reality, however, the company has continued to charge all workers 20% of all of their medical bills. They must either pay this share in cash when they arrive at the clinics in Tegucigalpa or the amount is deducted from their paycheque, although ever since the collective contract was signed, the company no longer makes note of these deductions as medical costs, but instead as personal loans, even when the company has no policy of loans for workers. There is only the rotating loan fund, but this was a conquest of the union and not company policy, the workers explained.

"The rotating fund was created specifically for emergencies, not to support a medical plan that is the sole obligation of the company, because it is a responsibility of the company," Martínez pointed out.

David Flores recounted that the last time he went to get a test done at the Policlinica in Tegucigalpa, he did not receive medical attention because he did not have sufficient funds. He arrived all prepared, with his medical insurance card, but clinic personnel told him that they had not negotiated with the mining company doctors, although it is the same clinic visited by almost all mine workers. They called the company, which asked Flores to front a part of the bill in cash, assuring him that he would be paid back later. As the amount was not within his financial means, Flores was not cared for and had to take the bus back to the Siria Valley with his son without getting the test done.

"Here, if you don't have money and you go to the doctor, you die, because they don't give you any money here to be able to go," observed Francisco Hernández.

Clearly, the workers most affected by the illegal medical costs demanded by the company are the same workers who are the most affected by health problems. In the case of the fired workers, Glamis intended to deduct the 20% of medical bills from their severance benefits. In some cases, such as that of David Flores, this amount comes to more than twenty thousand lempiras (approximately \$1,050 US dollars).

Another great cause for concern is the fact that the workers do not even have photocopies of their test results, diagnostics or other documentation related to their health conditions. The company holds all of the documentation. In many cases, the workers are not even familiar with the content of this documentation and only know what the doctors working for Glamis Gold tell them.

"This is one of the problems that I would like to be taken into account," said Martínez. "When the workers go for an analysis, the doctors from the region here don't give them any information. And when the worker goes to find out the results and ask for an explanation, the doctors from here get mad at them."

"The company used to give itself the luxury of telling the workers that 'the door is wide open.' When someone would go to make a complaint or demand, the Human Resources manager -

ignorant of the law, ignorant of the rights we have as workers, as is set out in the Constitution of the Republic and the Labour Code - would tell them 'the door is wide open, there are 200 waiting for your job, don't you remember how you were before?' Just like that! She was treating the workers with psychological torture."

"For all of these reasons, today we are not permitting any of these abuses. And from today forward, from the 25th when we took this action, from that day on, we're setting a precedent for Minerales Entre Mares. Now the workers are no longer alone; the workers are represented by the Entre Mares de Honduras S.A. Workers' Union, SITRAMEMHSA. And we're going to struggle to the very end, to make them respect us."

ALL OVER, GLAMIS GOLD SHINES FOR THE ABUSES AND DESTRUCTION IT CAUSES

Glamis Gold has not only been denounced by workers and certainly not only in Honduras. Registered in Vancouver, Canada, as a publicly traded Canadian company with its headquarters in Reno, Nevada, Glamis Gold Ltd operates in several countries by way of wholly owned subsidiaries, such as Minerales Entre Mares de Honduras. The actions and denouncements against Glamis have also occurred in several countries.

In the state of California, Glamis planned on opening an open pit gold mine in the Imperial Valley, a desert through which a pathway of Quechan First Nation sacred sites runs. After an arduous struggle by both the Quechan Nation and environmentalist groups, then-governor Gray Davis passed special mitigation measures for open pit mining projects located on or close to sacred sites.

Basing its arguments in the investment protection clauses of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect in 1994 between Canada, the United States and Mexico, Glamis Gold has brought a case against the United States for 50 million dollars, arguing that the mitigation measures meant that the company's project was no longer economically viable. This case, which so clearly demonstrates the destructive capitalist vision of FTAs, has not yet been resolved.

Glamis Gold is also facing strong resistance in Guatemala, where the company owns the Marlin project located in two municipalities of majority indigenous population in the department of San Marcos. Ever since news that the company was installing itself in the region to construct a gold mine got around, both local communities and organizations at the regional, national and international levels have been waging a long struggle against the project and its financing by the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank. Diverse initiatives have been organized, ranging from highway blockades to a locally organized democratic indigenous community consultation process in the municipality of Sipakapa, in which the local population expressed once more their total rejection of mining activities in their territory.

Even before the exploitation phase had begun, the Marlin project was already linked to two violent deaths at the hands of public and private 'security' forces. Repression continues, as communities continue to struggle with dignity for a humane and healthy community development process, defined, controlled and executed by and for the communities themselves.

In Canada, diverse organizations are struggling to put an end to the impunity of global actors, fighting so that Canadian companies can be tried in Canadian courts for abuses and damages caused by their actions and operations around the world. Several organizations have taken up the example of Glamis Gold to highlight the need for these changes and to raise awareness about the exploitative and unjust global 'development' model.

Nor is it the first time that Glamis has been the target of denunciations and actions in Honduras. The communities of the Siria Valley organized and manifested their opposition to the San Martin project in open municipal hall meetings and protests when the mine was under construction. The Siria Valley Regional Environmental Committee continues its unwavering struggle for the environment and justice, denouncing the arsenic and mercury contamination in the region, the grave health problems in communities neighbouring the mine, among innumerable other abuses and negative impacts caused by Glamis Gold's mining operations.

UNITED WE ARE STRONGER

"As the Siria Valley Regional Environmental Committee," explained Carlos Amador, a member of the Committee, "we are very worried about the situation of the Entre Mares workers, especially the serious health problems they are suffering from and the information regarding contamination caused by the company. We support them because we see that they are fighting for a just cause."

This morning, November 1st, the SITRAMEMHSA members were back at the gates, but this time to go back to work - including the 27 who were to have been fired. They will continue in the same department as always, crushing the blasted material and transporting it to the cyanide solution-filled pools along the conveyor belt system.

It is not exactly a fairy tale ending. David Flores, Victoriano Cruz and Francisco Hernández are still suffering from the same serious health problems. The vast majority of residents from nearby communities are still suffering from the same serious health problems. Water is still scarce. The local economy is still ruined. There is still contamination. The residents of San José de Palo Ralo, a community relocated to make way for the mine over five years ago, have still not received legal documentation for their lands and homes. Glamis Gold will still be reaping in millions in profits.

Still, the first major action of a young union with little support has achieved its most important objective. Perhaps the victory of their collective action will give the workers the strength and courage to continue fighting for the rights they upheld during their strike: for independent tests of sick workers and fair compensation and justice, for free and unbiased medical attention, for full disclosure of their health conditions, for strict control of cyanide and contaminated water and waste material, for the respect of their collective contract...

It would be far-fetched to hope that Glamis Gold has 'learned its lesson' when the company is by nature a powerful global actor operating with impunity, benefiting from an exploitative and destructive business model that goes by the name of 'development.' At the very least, however, perhaps the company will no longer proudly announce in its annual reports that none of its workers are unionized. And perhaps SITRAMEMHSA will continue to struggle against company abuses, in keeping with the vow so adamantly expressed by union

president Daniel Martínez during the strike:

"Today we are not permitting any more of these abuses. And from today forward, from the 25th when we took this action, from that day on, we're setting a precedent for Minerales Entre Mares. Now the workers are no longer alone; the workers are represented by the Entre Mares de Honduras S.A. Workers' Union, SITRAMEMHSA. And we're going to struggle to the very end, to make them respect us."

===

WHAT TO DO:

- * Please set up your own, personal e-list, and re-send this type of information. A huge part of our work, over the loooong-term, is to break through the mainstream media's domination of information and distribute accurate and educational information;
- * Please plan and carry out educational and activist events in your community on these and other issues related to global equality, justice and environmental well-being;
- * Please make tax-deductible donations for the community based development, enviro- and HR work of groups like the ones mentioned above in Honduras.

Rights Action (Derechos en Accion) carries out and supports community development, environment, emergency relief and human rights work in Honduras, Guatemala, Chiapas (Mexico), Haiti and elsewhere. For more information, to make tax-deductible donations or to get involved, contact Rights Action: info@rightsaction.org, 416-654-2074, www.rightsaction.org.

===