



THE DISTANCES BETWEEN SAN MIGUEL IXTAHUACAN (GUATEMALA) & KING STREET (TORONTO, CANADA):

**Two consultations, two unanimous votes,
Winners and losers, joined at the hip, in the global mining industry**

By Grahame Russell, July 2008

ON MAY 20, 2008, in the Le Royal Meridien Hotel on King Street (in Toronto's financial district) Goldcorp Inc. held their Annual General Meeting (AGM). After listening to Chairman Ian Telfer and CEO Kevin MacArthur explain just how enormous their profits were in 2007, shareholders raised their hands and approved every motion to the effect that Goldcorp Inc. should continue with its mining operations in San Miguel Ixtahuacan (Guatemala), in the Siria Valley (Honduras) and across the Americas.



(Photo: Allan Cedillo Lissner, May 20, 2008, Le Royal Meridien Hotel, Toronto)

ON APRIL 30, 2008, in the municipal gymnasium of San Miguel Ixtahuacan, Guatemala, hundreds of community leaders raised their hands and voted to hold a legally binding referendum on whether or not to allow open pit mining to continue in their communities and territory. The gymnasium was filled with indigenous (Mayan Mam) women and men from some 60 villages who came to say that not only do they have the right to be consulted about whether or not they want large scale "development" projects in their territory, but that they are now going to exercise that right.



(Photo: Miguel Iriondo, April 30, 2008, San Miguel Ixtahuacan Municipal Gymnasium)

In the late 1990s, early 2000s, the people of San Miguel Ixtahuacan were never properly informed or consulted about whether or not they wanted an open pit, cyanide leaching gold mine in their territory and communities. Since 2005, Goldcorp Inc. (www.goldcorp.com) has been operating its hugely profitable "Marlin" mine that has directly and indirectly caused: deforestation, community division and social breakdown, repression, water depletion, water and air contamination, health harms (respiratory problems, skin disease, hair loss, eye problems, etc), destruction of homes, and more.

CHASM BETWEEN THE WINNERS AND LOSERS

I was at both meetings. It was humbling and inspiring to be in San Miguel Ixtahuacan with a delegation of North Americans, witnessing the people vote to possibly put an end to harmful mining in their territory, knowing that repression and local tensions will increase. It was depressing to go to Goldcorp's AGM and witness the directors and shareholders vote to continue with more of the same harmful mining.

There is a huge distance geographically between where the corporate, financial and investor decisions are taken to initiate and extend mining around the world, and the places – like San Miguel Ixtahuacan – where most of the harms and destruction caused by this type of mining are experienced. There is an even greater distance culturally, ethically and spiritually between the winners and losers in this global business enterprise.

LITANY OF SELF PRAISE AND CONGRATULATION

In Toronto, I was able to get into the Goldcorp shareholder meeting, along with Carlos Amador, community leader from the Goldcorp affected region of Honduras; Fausto Valiento, from the Goldcorp affected region of Guatemala; Sandra Cuffe, a Canadian with years of experience living and working in mining affected communities of Central America; and other Canadians who have gone and seen first-hand the environmental and health harms and human rights violations caused by Goldcorp in Guatemala and Honduras.

We spent the main part of the shareholder meeting listening to Chairman Ian Telfer and CEO Kevin MacArthur report – with colorful flowcharts - on just how much money the shareholders were making, that they would probably continue to make in the foreseeable future, and that Goldcorp remains the world's cheapest producer of gold. There were smiles and chuckles from the gathered investors.

Then Goldcorp presented a promotional documentary focusing mainly on its operations in Honduras and Guatemala, painting a rosy picture of how Goldcorp was helping the local communities, how happy the local communities were that Goldcorp was mining there, how Goldcorp was leaving the forests and environment better off than when Goldcorp arrived, and on and on.

IN CENTRAL AMERICA, TO LEARN ABOUT “OUR” PROBLEM

Over the past few years, Rights Action (the not-for-profit group I work with) has done a lot of work in the Goldcorp mining affected regions of Guatemala and Honduras: -i- direct funding of community based organizations trying to remedy the environmental and health harms and human rights violations; and, -ii- educational work with Canadians and Americans, focused on how the harms and violations we are bearing witness to are “our” problem in the global north, as it is a North American company operating with the support of North American governments, wherein the majority of beneficiaries are North American investors (including, to name a few Canadian investors, the Canadian Pension Plan, OMERS Administration Corp., Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan Board, British Columbia Investment Management Corp, and many more)

In late April-early May, I led two delegations of Canadians and Americans on educational seminars to Guatemala. Both groups spent two days in the Goldcorp affected Mayan communities of San Miguel Ixtahuacan. We toured the perimeter of the huge and growing open pit mine and one of the delegations had a visit inside the mine, hosted by Goldcorp. We also interviewed several community leaders and families and people whose lives and livelihoods have been harmed and destroyed by the mine.

LITANY OF HARMS AND VIOLATIONS

As with previous delegations, both groups heard testimony and witnessed the litany of harms and violations: deforestation, community division and social breakdown, repression, water depletion, water and air contamination, health harms (respiratory problems, skin disease, hair loss, eye problems, etc), destruction of homes, etc. Please read the recent report “Investing In Conflict”, found at: <http://www.rightsaction.org/Reports/research.pdf>. Upon request, we can provide more information. (Contact: info@rightsaction.org)

QUESTION AND (NO) ANSWER PERIOD

Beyond the words of the Goldcorp CEO and Chairman about the great profits flowing north into investor's pockets, it was the promotional documentary at the AGM that so rudely and dismissively manifested the chasm between the reality on the ground and

what is being presented to shareholders and investors. But for our participation in the question and answer period in the meeting, the investors would have no idea whatsoever that everything was not absolutely perfect in Honduras and Guatemala.

One by one, Carlos Amador, Fausto Valiento, Grahame Russell, Sandra Cuffe, Brian O'Neill, Trista Ling, Nancy Russell and others stood and contested, in various degrees and ways, what had been presented to the investors and shareholders.

The messages could not have been more contrasting, Carlos and Fausto talking with the most controlled anger. They are from the mining affected regions, and it is their friends and communities, land and waters that are suffering. They knew some of the people and places featured in the Goldcorp promotional documentary, and saw old footage and out of context quotes being manipulated and used to justify Goldcorp's presence in their communities.

From the company officials and shareholders, we received no answers to our critical comments and questions.

MEDIA AND THE GOVERNMENT – MISSING IN ACTION

It is not just Goldcorp providing a distorted picture to its investors and shareholders of what is happening in Guatemala and Honduras.

The Canadian government has been an unapologetic and active promoter and supporter of the expansion of the Canadian mining industry into all corners of Central America – ignoring the well-documented environmental and health harms and human rights violations.

The media, with some notable exceptions, analyzes mining in terms of stock market prices in the Business Section, ignoring human rights violations and environmental and health harms caused by Canadian companies across the globe.

CHIPPING AWAY AT IMPUNITY

The question and answer period was perhaps slightly positive as some investors began to ask a few questions of their own. Goldcorp's CEO was careful not to let our interventions go on too long and the Q&A session was brought to an abrupt end with a number of other people still wanting to speak. Afterwards, a few investors approached us to ask further questions about what we had been saying. For the most part, our interventions apparently affected few investors and shareholders.

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Now, a couple of months later, none of the problems have been addressed.

In Honduras, Goldcorp is operating at full capacity, even as it prepares to close its "San Martin" mine there. The draft closure plan has no provisions for repairing the damages and compensating the local populations for extensive health harms, deforestation, depletion and contamination of all the local water sources.

In Guatemala, tensions, threats and repression are mounting. Since April 30, when the people of San Miguel Ixtahuacan announced they have the right to hold a referendum on mining, repression and death threats have spiked. (Contact info@rightsaction.org for recent urgent actions and articles addressing these recent issues).

The chasm remains enormous between the unjustly enriching beneficiaries (mainly) in North America and the communities and environment being harmed and suffering in Guatemala and Honduras.

Much support is need for the community organizations in Central America. Much critical education and outreach work is needed in Canada and the United States. Stay tuned. Get involved. Thank-you.

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Feel free to publish and distribute this article far and wide. Grahame Russell works with Rights Action. With tax-deductible legal status in Canada and USA, Rights Action funds and works with community-based Indigenous, development, environment and human rights organizations in Central America and Southern Mexico; and educates about and is involved in activism related to global development, environmental and Indigenous and human rights struggles.

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for indigenous and community-based organizations that are implementing their own development, human rights and environment projects --- including communities that are resisting harms caused by mining and carrying out their own, legally binding consultations ---, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

* UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887;

* CANADA: 422 Parliament St, Box 82552, Toronto ON, M5A 4N8.

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS: www.rightsaction.org.

HUMAN RIGHTS DELEGATIONS TO MINING-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES: Consider forming your own group and coming on an educational seminar trip to learn more about community and Indigenous resistance to mining and other large-scale "development" projects.

2nd HEMISPHERIC GATHERING AGAINST MILITARIZATION – HONDURAS, OCTOBER 3-5:

Form your own group and come to Honduras for this continental Gathering. ¡Para callar las armas, hablemos los pueblos! (To quiet weapons, the people must speak!).

www.antimilitarizacion.blogspot.com; info@rightsaction.org. PLACE: La Esperanza, Intibucá, Honduras.

3rd SOCIAL FORUM OF THE AMERICAS – GUATEMALA, OCTOBER 7-12: Form your own group and come to Guatemala. Thousands of people from across the Americas are expected at this gathering to debate and discuss (and enjoy awesome music, art and theater) how Another World Is Possible ... And Necessary. For more info:

info@rightsaction.org.

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RECEIVE OUR QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER: info@rightsaction.org

CREATE YOUR OWN E-MAIL LIST: and re-distribute this and other information.

LISTEN: to www.democracynow.org news program every day.

READ: Eduardo Galeano's "Open Veins of Latin America"; Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine"; Paolo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed".

SMILE: And live to make another world is possible, everyday.