

## **GOLDCORP'S "ENDLESS MINE" IN GUATEMALA**

We re-produce this article by Nate Einbinder, who participated in an educational delegation-seminar to Guatemala in May 2008 that Rights Action helped coordinate.

**SEE BELOW** ... to get involved in supporting the Maya Mam communities that are resisting the environmental and health harms and human rights violations being caused by Goldcorp's "Marlin" mine in Guatemala.

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### **THE HOPE FOR AN ENDLESS MINE A STORY FROM SAN MARCOS, GUATEMALA**

By Nathan Einbinder (neinbinder@hotmail.com)

Not unlike the original conquistadores, in their fervent scramble for precious metals and disregard for Indigenous peoples, the new mining doctrine in Guatemala is just as much a threat to the Maya campesinos and their perpetual struggle for land and rights.

Argued by critics as the next wave of land theft and imperialism, foreign controlled mining activity has increased from practically nothing ten years ago into massive concessions—equaling 10% or more of the entire country—giving nearly unlimited exploitative rights to the corporations (1).

In the case of the "Marlin" gold mine, situated in the remote, highland department of San Marcos, local inhabitants risk their lives by opposing the occupation and destruction of their land and communities, leading a continent-wide struggle against the Canadian mining giant Goldcorp Inc.

As part of a university-led delegation this past May 2008, I was fortunate enough to tour Goldcorp's controversial mine, and meet with leaders of the resistance movement.

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After traveling for hours on a dirt road through the rugged, predominantly indigenous municipality of San Miguel Ixtahuacan, the Marlin gold mine is a shocking, almost unbelievable sight. Located on a steep, eroding hillside above the Rio Cuilco, it appears like an open gash in the patchwork forest and agriculture, as though an entire rib of the mountain had been removed.

Everywhere within the basin are the sounds of trucks and earth crushing machines echoing off the canyon walls. At the height of the dry season, there is no end to the dust from roads and the expanding open pit, and towards the end of each day, a fine red smoky haze settles over the landscape.

From a dark, unoccupied warehouse in a village a few miles beyond the mine, Manuel (2), a community organizer and leader of the resistance, speaks to our group while projecting images against the back wall. Despite the urgency of the subject, he is calm, and presents his case as though we are a jury to be convinced.

"How will we ever be able to recuperate this land?" He asks us. "We have issues of water contamination, deforestation, and skin diseases appearing on our elderly and children. And where are the compensations for people living near the mine? We have displacement issues, poor campesinos tricked or forced into selling their land to the company."

Manuel's story is an old one, all too common among the conquered landscapes of Latin America. Whether it be for the production of cash crops such as bananas, coffee, and sugar cane, or other so-called development projects such as dams, mines, and super-highways, the indigenous peoples of Guatemala have been conveniently pushed out of the way, with their land and rights usurped in various stages of occupation. Over the past five hundred years this process has led to one of the most unequal land distributions in all of Latin America, with just 2 percent of the population controlling 85 percent of the land (3).

For the people of San Miguel Ixtahuacan—the Maya peasant farmers and laborers—it has been repeatedly stated by Goldcorp that all of the rules have been followed, including the newly ratified International Labor

Organization Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, an international law that states that proper consultation and consent from indigenous peoples must occur before resource extraction takes place within their territory (4).

According to Manuel and many other mine-affected citizens, the consultation was inadequate, full of lies and empty promises, and that no consent was ever given to the company. The results, both socially and environmentally, have been disastrous.

### **'IN DEFENSE OF THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES'**

The history of resistance by the indigenous peoples of Guatemala dates back nearly 500 years, when the Spaniards first arrived and began to displace the Mayas from their lower elevation, agriculturally productive lands. Over time, waves of oppression led by a deeply entrenched, politically corrupt oligarchy have coincided with rebellions in the countryside, with the last major peasant struggle ending just over ten years ago (5).

Although the risks are high in resisting so-called 'development'—projects like Marlin that maintain a system of wealth and power for a select few—the citizens of San Marcos have decided that it is necessary to move against Goldcorp and their Guatemalan partners in order to preserve their families and livelihoods.

In a series of public outcries, indigenous groups have set a precedent by organizing a popular campaign against Marlin. Even before the mine opened, protests in the department of Sololá blocked major roads from carrying equipment. This ended with a call of over 700 troops by then President Berger, and ended with two dead and at least ten injured (6).

In a desperate move back in January 2007, after the company ignored a compensation request by the mine affected communities of San Miguel for disputed land-purchase prices, cracked homes, excessive dust, and water usage, at least 500 people successfully blocked roads leading into the mine, shutting operations for 13 days. This resulted in the violent and illegal arrest of community leaders, later dubbed the "Goldcorp 7", under terrorism charges and a heightened police presence throughout the region.

In recent months, death threats, police retaliation, intimidation and general violence have become common against community leaders and citizens who openly oppose the mine.

### **THE POPULAR CONSULTA**

The next step, according to Manuel, is a consultation, or referendum with the community. In hopes, this will send a highly publicized message to Goldcorp that the community wants them out (7). "Out of the 59 aldeas in San Miguel Ixtahuacan, 40 have agreed to hold the consultation", states Miguel. "We are confident that the majority will vote against the mine".

As seen in the neighboring municipalities of Sipakapa and Comitancillo, this has been successful so far in keeping mining out (8), but it is common knowledge that the company has vast areas surrounding Marlin staked out for future extraction. And with a new mining code that gives corporations unlimited access to land and mineral rights—and the record price of gold—it seems highly unlikely that Goldcorp is going to simply pack up and leave.

### **'WE HAVE HOPES FOR AN ENDLESS MINE'**

The morning after our arrival to San Miguel Ixtahuacan was bright and sunny, and despite our lofty elevation in the Sierra, it was hot and windless. Waiting at the gates of the Marlin mine, I was sure that our reservation to tour the site would get somehow denied, as a young security guard with an automatic rifle dangling from his shoulders called around asking for assistance.

Soon enough, to my disbelief, a woman pulled up to greet us in her SUV—our guide for the day—the regional environmental director, an American named Lisa Wade.

With a degree from the Montana School of Mines and several years' work experience in Latin America, Lisa was confident in her knowledge of the operation, and knew how to deal with groups like ours. After shuttling us to a stuffy lunchroom in the main office, we went over the basics of the operation, and she explained how Marlin worked with an open pit and underground tunnels, the function of the tailings pond, and the cyanide leaching process—which is used to extract gold from the roughly 6000 tons of earth brought through the mill each day.

When asked about the environmental damage associated with cyanide usage (Marlin uses 200 tons per month, bought from Du Pont and shipped into the country through a west coast port), she explained that cyanide, although highly toxic, is consumed by the gold leaching process and has only short-term effects on the environment. She also told us how Marlin signed onto a strict, however unenforceable, international cyanide code (9). "We have water monitoring stations below in the Rio Cuilco, and have never found any contaminants", she added, while showing us the entire watershed on a large map.

When asked about local wells drying up, a major complaint for those living in the vicinity, she responded that it was impossible, as the water they used was from "a large fissure a thousand feet deep, without any connection to the aquifer". She also added that most of the water was recycled from the tailings pond, and that only 15% was pulled from their well, about 10 liters per second.

In roughly an hour's time, Lisa talked about various topics: the royalties given back to the municipality and how the money had evidently been 'lost', the World Bank loan Goldcorp paid off last year, and other new projects they had planned around the country. She was quick to avoid questions that referred to the social upheaval and recent violence the mine was causing in the region, claiming that we would need to talk to a different person with those kinds of questions, and he wasn't available.

When asked about the future vision of Marlin, and the possibilities for extending their current ten-year plan in the department of San Marcos, she smiled proudly, responding: "We have hopes for an endless mine". But, of course, she assured us, this would be in full compliance with the surrounding municipalities.

## **THE "BEAUTIFUL" TAILINGS POND**

Walking back through the headquarters building, past a blurry, oversized picture of two indigenous women standing in front of tractors and other machinery, we boarded a small bus—a vehicle specifically used for taking around guests.

Our first site on the tour was the tailings pond, and after arriving we stood for a few moment in awe, shading our eyes from the harsh glare off the tainted pool. "You may think this is ugly, but we think it's beautiful". She was referring to the sand 'beach' in front of the dyke that held back the reservoir—a large green body of water the size of a small lake, located at the head of a narrow canyon about one thousand feet above the Rio Cuilco. "You see, the sand here shows us that nothing can get through; it adds support to the dam".

It was a horrible looking place, as it should be, surrounded by dry, eroding slopes leading to the small town of San Jose Nueva Esperanza. I imagined the valley this once was: a mosaic of woods, adobe homes and subsistence farms, with a creek flowing through its center. There was none of this noise and heavy machinery, clouds of dust, open pits, or this toxic reservoir awaiting imminent discharge into the river below.

It was hard to believe that all this destruction was in the name of a few gold bars none of these people would ever see—bound for some underground vault in New York or Toronto, or sold as jewelry in LA.

"What about the inhabitants up there in San Jose, are they being compensated for this?" She answered my question as I assumed she would, with a solemn "No ... but many of our workers live there". "And what about this dam, will it ever be removed, the land rehabilitated?" "No, that would be cost inefficient".

Other members of our group with more scientific expertise began to question her about the effectiveness of this operation—the fact that there was no lining under the pond—a typical requirement.

"It's an almost impermeable clay core. We're very fortunate here to have this kind of geology". Although most of us weren't entirely convinced, she argued that nothing made it into the watershed, and that they were complying with all the international contaminant protocols issued by the World Bank and that a new, very expensive water treatment plant was being built before anything was released into the river.

"We're also trying some alternative methods for lowering the reservoir during the rainy season". Smiling, she told us of the snowmakers they had shipped in from a ski resort in the US, which they used to disseminate the contaminated reservoir water into the air. She denied any inclination that it could have adverse effects to people who lived around the site.

## **MOUNTAIN REMOVAL**

We then drove across the top of the dam and towards the open pit. Stopping mid-way, Lisa stated that the dam wall would have to be raised by another 10 meters within the next few years, and if they were to extend their stay, another large dam and pond would have to be constructed in a different valley.

It took about 15 minutes to arrive to the pit, winding our way past various buildings and vertical sand slopes. She pointed out some workers about half way up, apparently planting trees and grasses for restoration.

The actual pit was large and deep into the side of the mountain, and it too had visible communities in the near vicinity, across a large canyon covered in pine and oak. Trucks barreled through filled with dirt and boulders. It felt like a gigantic city landfill—constantly growing and shifting around. Again when asked about what would happen to this area after Marlin left, she stated that it wouldn't be possible to rehabilitate the landscape here, that it was one of the "visible impacts of their presence". With a blasting planned at noon, we didn't linger around for too long.

On our way back to headquarters, we stopped at the cyanide leaching area and had a quick view of the entrance to the tunnels. Everywhere was a flurry of activity—earth moving machines and workers scurrying quickly between stations.

### **FROTHY GREEN POOLS**

Standing on a platform over a series of frothy green pools and concrete towers, Lisa's voice petered off in the distance as she explained the exact process of extracting gold from the filled up rock and soil. It all seemed amazing to me, and surreal—the sheer size of the operation and the capital that must have been needed to run such a facility—in a region where not even the most basic services were available for its inhabitants. Who were these indigenous workers tearing at the ground, obeying orders from North American's in hard hats and rubber boots? How much longer could it last?

The remaining part of our visit took place back in the lunchroom, where we attempted to return to our original question: What about the people of this community who oppose your presence, the environmental destruction and contamination issues? Lisa calmly reasserted her position, that the people of San Miguel were properly consulted before Marlin opened in 2005. She also made reference to the communities of neighboring Sipakapa, as if they were crazy for not wanting the mine to expand to their municipality. "It's only a small minority of the people that don't want us here" she stated.

It was obvious that we weren't going to change Lisa's mind about the obvious illegality of Marlin's presence or get any information from her that we didn't already know. In tense agreement, we all said goodbye, and were shuttled back to the entrance gate. Our young, gun-wielding soldier was there to take our names and give his farewell.

### **SKIN DISEASES AND LANDLESSNESS**

Immediately after leaving the mine we stopped at the home of Emeterio Perez, who lived up the road. In an informal meeting, our delegation gathered around him and a few other men from the community in an open patio outside his kitchen. "My land, is what you saw in the pit today, and now I have nothing". Emeterio is one of the original landowners forced to sell to Marlin four years ago. He says that a white man approached him at his home and gave a price—which was way below the market value—then told him that regardless if he agreed, they would get what they wanted. Out of fear, he sold to them.

"The mayor gave all the permission they needed to start operating here," said Emeterio, "without any consultation with the people". Since moving to their current home above the canyon, his wife has had a stroke and is developing a skin rash similar to others living in the vicinity. Coming out from the back room, she was hunched over and shaking, with tears running down her deeply weathered face. Emeterio is working with a lawyer in San Marcos and sent letters to Goldcorp, but hasn't received a reply. He also claims to have had shots fired over his head by security guards after a community meeting.

As we were leaving, other families arrived to see us from down the road. Although they all wanted to share their stories with us, we only had time to talk with one woman, who pulled up the shirt of her young child showing a rash identical to Emeterio's wife. They all apparently lived in the string of hilltop villages directly above the mine.

### **COMITANCILLO: NO A LA MINERIA / NO TO MINING**

Heading west from San Miguel, it was another endless afternoon of building storms, winding mountain roads, and dust. Shortly after the sun set behind Volcan Tajumulco, we arrived to the town of Comitancillo, and after eating in a local comedor, we were off to bed.

Seven A.M. at the house of the Spanish priest, Father Elio: another resistance leader, powerful speaker, and defender of indigenous rights. From his second story window, there was a sweeping view of the cemetery, with its colorful graves and tombs, and the steep, forested slopes above town.

Over a breakfast of toast and coffee, he gave us a briefing of the past five years. "When Goldcorp obtained the concession of our land in 2005, we had all the communities come together and held a consultation. We were the first municipality in the region to vote against them." Although the government stated that all subsurface land was property of the state, the Berger administration announced that there would be no more licenses in Comitancillo.

Unlike the municipality of San Miguel Ixtahuacan—which has a pro-mining mayor and some division in the community because of new jobs created—Comitancillo is a region in almost unanimous agreement. "We know what kind of results this form of 'development' has to offer, and we don't want it," stated the priest. "As a municipal act we've created a plan for sustainable development alternatives, such as tourist projects, agricultural production and technology training; projects in agroecology and a cultural center. We're also seeking a specialized regional hospital".

Despite Comitancillo's binding 2005 consultation and promises from the Berger administration that no new licenses would be distributed, the bad news came last month in a letter from the Department of Mines and Energy, which rejected the historic 2005 consultation, stating that the new Maquivil license had been officially approved—a Goldcorp concession incorporating a staggering 11 municipalities in three departments and covering 500 square kilometers.

As a symbolic act to re-affirm the validity of their consultation three years ago, indigenous leaders and the local government were holding a ceremony that morning, and our delegation was invited to join in solidarity.

### **'COMITANCILLO IS NOT FOR SALE'**

It was a short walk through town to the municipal building, past the market with its stalls of fruit, clothing, tortilla and meat vendors. Onlookers stared at our group as though they'd never seen a gringo before, let alone ten of us at once. Gathering in front of the freshly painted building, the people of Comitancillo began to arrive on the back of flatbed trucks and old Bluebird school buses, coming from the outlying aldeas; small rural communities that make up the municipality. After several mayors spoke to the growing crowd—in a mixture of Spanish and Mam—we began to march to the soccer field on a hillside above town.

It was a scene of intense energy and pride, with chanting and signs, all in support of a landscape free from mines, pollution and exploitation. There were children walking in single file in their primary school uniforms and traditionally dressed indigenous elders moving slowly up the hill, men with hardened expressions and woman in long, bright dresses.

Upon our arrival to the field, our group went to a high point, alongside some of the local leaders and the newly elected mayor, including Father Elio. Nobody had any idea that the gathering would be so huge and well represented, and the Priest seemed to have a constant, elated grin.

Large groups of people continued to pour into the site for almost an hour, each with their own banners, songs and leaders. By ten o'clock, the crowd had reached about 2500 people, and was a roar of megaphones, laughter, and yelling. In the midst of the chaos and disorder, our group slipped out unnoticed, arriving back to the polished streets of Antigua by late afternoon.

### **GET INVOLVED - MORE INFORMATION**

The future of San Marcos and the tense situation surrounding the Goldcorp's mine is constantly changing. In recent weeks, widespread legal charges against anti-Marlin mine community members have been on the rise as local inhabitants become more adamant in the protection of their land.

For updates and a plethora of useful and relevant information, the Guatemala-based NGO, Rights Action, has a

website and list serve (info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org), and is currently at the frontlines in the struggle in San Miguel Ixtahuacan. Mining Watch (www.miningwatch.ca) is also an exhaustive resource, with information regarding mines and companies across the world.

For an excellent background in Latin American studies, with a good emphasis on the effects of mining since the Spaniard's arrival, read *The Open Veins of Latin America*, by Eduardo Galeano (1973) Monthly Review Press, New York, NY.

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**TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS** for indigenous and community-based organizations that are implementing their own community development projects (schools, health clinics, solidarity economic productive projects, etc), human rights and environment projects, and resisting the harms caused by large-scaled "development" projects, 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: [http://www.rightsaction.org/Templates/donations\\_index.html](http://www.rightsaction.org/Templates/donations_index.html)

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

**2nd HEMISPHERIC GATHERING AGAINST MILITARIZATION – HONDURAS, OCTOBER 2-6:** 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](http://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.

JOIN: Rights Action's our email list: <http://www.rightsaction.org/lists/?p=subscribe&id=3>

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](http://www.democracynow.org) news program every day.

READ: Eduardo Galeano's "Open Veins of Latin America"; Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine"; Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States";

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

**RIGHTS ACTION --** Based in Guatemala, Rights Action (with tax-deductible legal status in Canada and USA) funds and works with community-based Indigenous, development, environment and human rights organizations in Guatemala and Honduras, and also in El Salvador, Oaxaca and Chiapas; and educates about and is involved in activism related to global development, environmental and Indigenous and human rights struggles.

FOOTNOTES:

1 Reports from several governmental and non-governmental groups vary on the exact amount of land that has been given to the corporations for extraction. 10 percent was the most common estimate, quoted in a recent Oxfam report:

[http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/news\\_updates/archive2005/news\\_update.2005-09-23.3194264505](http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/news_updates/archive2005/news_update.2005-09-23.3194264505)

2 Because of recent security issues, certain community members have asked to have their names changed for this article.

3 An excellent book on this topic: *Born in Blood & Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*. Chasteen, John Charles (2006). W.W. Norton and Company, New York, NY.

4 For more information, please read this report from the Bank Information Center:

<http://www.bicusa.org/en/Article.2019.aspx>

5 Guatemala is still recovering from a 40-year internal armed conflict that ended up taking the lives of at least

200,000 mainly innocent Maya civilians, along with teachers, unionists, human rights workers, etc. At the height of the conflict in the early 1980's, simply being indigenous made you a target of the military and their campaign against the "communist" rebels. Although a peace agreement between groups was signed in 1996, tensions are still high between indigenous peasants and the government. For more information on this subject please read: Commission For Historical Clarification (CEH) (1999). Guatemala: memory of silence. Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification Conclusions and Recommendations

<http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/toc.html> (English language Executive Summary).

6 At the time of this protest, the World Bank was still involved in the funding for the mine. The famous statement by Berger, "We have to protect the investors" was said shortly before he called in the military to break up the protest. See the full article: <http://www.freepress.org/departments/display/9/2005/1242>

7 Because of the impunity of the current administration and their cozy relationship with Goldcorp and other foreign investors, there has been major controversy surrounding the legal strength of the community referendum, a process that has its roots deep into the indigenous democratic process. For more information regarding this topic please read this informative article printed by the Bank Information Center:

<http://www.bicusa.org/en/Article.2191.aspx>

8 Please see Dawn Paley's article on this issue in The Dominion:

<http://www.dominionpaper.ca/weblogs/dawn/1887>

9 A report discussing the international code in regards to a cyanide accident in Romania can be found at:

<http://greenhorizon.rec.org/bulletin/Bull111/cyanide.html>