

March 1, 2009

GOLDCORP & HEALTH HARMS BY THE "MARLIN" MINE IN GUATEMALA

Below, an interview with a man who works in Goldcorp Inc.'s Marlin Mine in the department of San Miguel Ixtahuacán.

This is the 3rd in a series about health problems associated with and caused by Goldcorp's "Marlin" mine in Guatemala.

- Read article "Who Is Emeterio Perez":
http://www.rightsaction.org/articles/Emeterio_Perez_013109.html
- Read and view photo-essay "Health Harms in San Miguel Ixtahuacán":
http://www.rightsaction.org/articles/San_Miguel_022009.htm

EDUCATIONAL DELEGATION TO GUATEMALA, APRIL 12-17:

Rights Action is leading this trip to Guatemala and the Goldcorp Inc.-mining affected regions. For more info: info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org.

GOLDCORP'S ANNUAL PUBLIC SHAREHOLDER MEETING:

May 22, 2009, Fairmont Waterfront Hotel, Vancouver: 900 Canada Place Way, Vancouver, BC

Please forward these articles and interviews far 'n' wide, including to doctors, nurses, health experts and others interested in further investigation of these problems.

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To get on/ off Rights Action's email list:

<http://www.rightsaction.org/lists/?p=subscribe&id=3>

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INTERVIEW

This interview was conducted by Francois Guindon and Karen Spring in December 2008 with a man who works in Goldcorp Inc.'s Marlin Mine in the department of San Miguel Ixtahuacán. He solicited that his name not be used.

WHAT YEAR DID YOU GET THIS JOB?

2002. I worked on rotation twice monthly. In 2003, I was hired in a permanent position.

WHAT ARE THE WORK SHIFTS?

I work four days, rest four days, in 12-hour shifts.

WHERE DO YOU WORK IN THE MINE? IN WHAT AREA?

Now in the preparation of sodium cyanide. It is called the "processing area".

HOW DO YOU FEEL AFTER A NORMAL WORK DAY?

I have headaches in the afternoons. The least dangerous product, but the strongest is metabisulphite (interviewer's note: "a salt of sulphurous acid in which the base replaces but half the hydrogen of the acid; an acid sulphate") because it causes many people to have nosebleeds. It has a strong odour. Cyanide is 100% more dangerous but the odour is less.

HAVE YOU ALWAYS WORKED IN THIS AREA?

Yes. I was in another area but also with chemicals. It has been four to five total years that I have worked there.

WHAT ARE THE CHEMICALS WITH WHICH YOU WORK AND HOW ARE THEY PROCESSED?

Sodium cyanide in powder, metabisulphite, copper sulphate. They are 1000 kilo bags that are prepared in tanks. Three tanks of cyanide are prepared daily, which means 3000 kilos in three tanks daily. Now the metabisulphite is prepared in ten tanks daily, which means 10,000 kilos daily. Thirty 25-kilo bags of copper sulphate are prepared daily.

IN THE 12 HOURS OF WORK, HOW MANY HOURS ARE YOU IN CONTACT WITH THE CHEMICALS?

For 12 hours since one does not leave to eat. One eats nearby.

DO YOU HAVE A WAY TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM THE CHEMICALS?

They give it there, but it is not sufficient. They have told us that there isn't equipment that is truly adequate.

THEY TOLD YOU THIS?

Yes, they told us. The adequate equipment is going to arrive in February, March [2009], but they still don't know.

SO YOU HAVE BEEN WORKING SINCE 2003 WITHOUT ADEQUATE EQUIPMENT?

Without adequate equipment.

BUT YOU HAVE SOME TYPE OF MASK?

Yes, there is a mask but it's for powder. For chemicals, there isn't one. There isn't one for my eyes either.

WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST WORRY ABOUT WORKING IN THE MINE?

The thing that gets to me is that the protection equipment is not sufficient in the mine. Many people, reaching about 40%, not only me, who are not yet affected are going to be affected over time. At times I comment to co-workers that working with chemicals is hard. "It's hard but there is no other work, so we continue," they say. There is a lot of need.

BEYOND THE INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT, HAVE THEY RECOMMENDED OTHER PRECAUTIONS THAT YOU SHOULD TAKE?

Try not to breathe, they say, but one has to breathe! They told us: "Try to do it in the fastest manner so that one breathes quickly and does not breathe in too many chemicals". Yes, that is what they told us.

THEY DID NOT GIVE YOU OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS? FOR EXAMPLE, TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES WHEN YOU GET HOME? BATHE?

Of course, but I always bring clothes here with chemicals. Sometimes I leave them outside, but I think that chemical has to enter inside the house because it stains. And as the clothes smell strong... the strongest chemical at the mine is metabisulphate which has caused many to have nosebleeds.

EVERY DAY?

Yes.

HAS THIS HAPPENED TO YOU?

No. Not to me, since I try to find the way to do what the bosses say (to not breathe)... sometimes I hold my breath because it hurts a lot when it enters the nose. Then I breathe quickly, cut the bag, lift the chemical powder and run. But my nose burns a lot.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT YOU FEEL PHYSICALLY AND WHAT ARE THE HEALTH PROBLEMS?

Yes, I was sick. I had facial paralysis that affected many, not only me.

ON ONE OR TWO SIDES?

Yes, completely on one side. And one eye did not close. I was affected for four months.

WHEN?

It was from August to December 2008.

HOW DID IT FEEL? DID IT HURT?

It didn't hurt. Simple half of my face fell asleep and I could not eat well. And one eye did not close. A lot of water came out of one of my eyes. That is the way it stayed fixed in place.

AND ARE THERE OTHER PEOPLE WHO WORK IN THE MINE WHO WERE AFFECTED?

Yes, there were seven of us workers with this problem from July onwards. But it is unknown why it was us seven... it's not known.

ARE THERE MEDICINES IN THE MINE?

There are. They injected me. They sent me to specialists in a hospital in Huehuetenango. And there, nothing, they only gave me some medicines that I had to pay for, but they did nothing for me.

HOW MUCH DID YOU PAY FOR THIS MEDICINE?

Q3,000 quetzals.

THE MINING COMPANY DID NOT WANT TO PAY?

No. I even went to complain to the human resource professional at the mine. I told her that I did not feel well, that I couldn't work. "Ah, good, then, nice meeting you," she said to me. She did my paperwork and gave me some vitamins that cost Q10 quetzals.

THERE ARE NO RESOURCES OR HEALTH INSURANCE OR MEDICINE IN THE MINE?

No. I have my insurance card. So when I arrived at the hospital, I showed them my insurance card, but they told me that this insurance is only for accidents. For example, if someone has a serious accident like a fracture... This, they attend to there, but an illness, they don't attend to illnesses, let's say common illnesses, they don't attend to.

THEN THERE IS NO SUPPORT FROM THE MINE FOR THIS TYPE OF PROBLEM?

There is no support... for an accident, I think so.

AND THE OTHER WORKERS ALSO SPENT A LOT OF MONEY?

They spent, spent, yet... one female workers spent Q6,000 quetzals one female worker spent. She works in the office but it is in the same area.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WORK IN THIS AREA?

70 people in the process.

HOW MANY PEOPLE HAD THIS PROBLEM?

From what we know, I was told that there were seven who had this problem once.

AND ALL AT THE SAME TIME?

Yes, from July to December. And now in August... that was strange.

HAVE YOU HAD RASHES, HAIR LOSS, INFECTIONS?

Infections, yes. I had a urinary infection.

YOU WERE NOT ATTENDED TO THEN EITHER?

Neither then. They gave me an injection without taking a test. They gave me many antibiotics. But that is normal there. They give us penicillin when one has a high fever.

DID THE COMPANY TAKE A BLOOD TEST?

Yes, in December 2005.

WHY DID THEY DO THIS BLOOD TEST?

Because at that time we were working near the ovens where the gold is melted down. There was no fresh air, nothing. So it was dark inside. There is gas and this is where the lead is handled. So to see if we had lead.

HOW LONG DID YOU STAY NEAR THE OVEN DAILY?

The same, 12 hours a day.

IS IT VERY HOT?

Very hot! They gave us an overall to protect ourselves but the temperature of the oven is 1,200 degrees.

DID YOU HAVE ANY ADEQUATE CLOTHING OR PROTECTION?

They gave us a suit (overall) but it was not sufficient. There was no air, ventilation. At the end of the day, we were completely soaked. Wet... all of us.

SO ONLY THAT ONCE DID THEY TAKE BLOOD TESTS?

No, they did another test in July 2008, but there was no result. They did not give the results. Undoubtedly the results are higher, my co-workers said, and they don't want us to see them.

SINCE YOU STARTED TO WORK IN 2003, DO YOU FEEL ANY PHYSICAL CHANGE?

I am more tired. I only feel sleepy. I get hot frequently. It seems like a fever.

HOW MANY TIMES A WEEK DO YOU HAVE A FEVER?

Each shift. Every three days. When I am off, I feel better. When I work, I have headaches and a fever.

DO YOU HAVE THE RESULTS OF THE BLOOD TESTS THAT WERE DONE IN DECEMBER 2005 AND JUNE 2008?

No, I don't have the results. The results from the last test from 2008 were not even returned.

WHY DO YOU THINK THAT YOU DON'T HAVE ACCES TO THE RESULTS?

We asked the doctor why. But he said that it is not him that does the analysis. The results come from Guatemala City and they have not been returned, they say. But there are some workers who already have their results from 2005.

ARE THERE WORKERS WHO HAVE COMMENTED ON THESE RESULTS?

They have only asked: Where can I go? Where can I get cured? We can only hope, they say...

DID YOU GET ANOTHER MEDICAL OPINION TO SEE WHAT WERE THE LEAD AND MERCURY LEVELS IN YOUR BLOOD?

No.

HAS THE COMPANY GIVEN YOU MONETARY COMPENSATON FOR THE HEALTH PROBLEMS THAT YOU HAVE HAD?

No, nothing. There is only compensation if there are serious accidents like losing an arm or a hand... Or if someone dies, there is money: Q50,000 quetzals in cash!

IS THE HOSPITAL IN HUEHUETENANGO ALWAYS THE SAME ONE THAT ATTENDS TO ALL THE MINE WORKERS?

Yes, it is a hospital that is hired to attend to patients who have accidents in the mine. There are two hospitals that are used by the company, as clients.

WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN HAVING AN INDEPENDENT OPINION TO SEE WHAT THE LEAD AND MERCURY LEVELS IN YOUR BLOOD ARE?

Yes.

WHEN YOU WERE PARALYZED, DID GOLDCORP KNOW THAT YOU HAD A HEALTH PROBLEM?

I mentioned it, but they only gave me 7 days off. Then I got sick working... The company didn't pay. Now IGSS (National Social Security Institute) pays a third of my salary...

THE COMPANY DID NOT DO ANYTHING TO ATTEND TO YOUR PROBLEM?

No.

HAVE YOU REPORTED YOUR BLOOD PROBLEM OR PARALYSIS TO ANOTHER INSTITUTION OR AUTHORITY?

No.

WHY DIDN'T YOU GET ANOTHER MEDICAL OPINION?

The money ran out first.

YOU TOLD ME THAT SEVEN OTHER CO-WORKERS HAD PARALYSIS. ARE THERE WORKERS THAT STILL HAVE THIS PROBLEM?

I think that all of them are better. Some had to pay for their own therapy. There was a woman who went to see a neurologist.

HAVE YOU HEARD THAT THERE ARE OTHER WORKERS WHO HAVE BLOOD PROBLEMS? CHEMICALS IN THEIR BLOOD?

Yes. From what I know there are four co-workers.

AND WHAT OPINION DO THEY HAVE ABOUT THIS?

I saw one man walking around with his papers. He wanted to see what help other institutions would give. But if the mining company finds out, they will fire us or they will cut off our work, they said. So we shouldn't tell or speak to this, he said, because he was afraid of losing his job and the mine sending us away.

SO LOOKING FOR ANOTHER MANNER TO TREAT THE HEALTH PROBLEMS SCARES THE WORKERS?

Well, so the mine does not know.

DOES THIS HAVE TO BE DONE IN A HIDDEN MANNER?

Yes, exactly, in a hidden manner...

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMEONE TALKS ABOUT THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY THE MINE?

There, if someone speaks poorly or against the mine, they cut him off, he's out of there!

DO YOU KNOW PEOPLE OR CO-WORKERS THAT HAVE SPOKEN "POORLY" OF THE MINE AND WERE FIRED?

Yes, many... many... there, what they want is one to speak positively about the mine. Only positively even if it is ugly, even if it is bad, but speak positively. Then the mine is happy.

HOW MANY PEOPLE, MORE OR LESS, WERE FIRED FOR HAVING SPOKEN "POORLY" ABOUT THE MINE?

Maybe 70 people all at once after the blockade in January 2007. And others who were not even in the blockade, maybe it was only heard that they spoke poorly, then "Out of here!" I am witness to one person who was not in the blockade and was fired with no reason.

HOW CAN YOU DESCRIBE COMMUNITY RELATIONS BEFORE THE MINE STARTED? AND IF THERE WAS SOME TYPE OF CHANGE?

Life was very, very calm... it was good and now that is lost.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF PEOPLE IN RESISTENCE? OF THE EIGHT WOMEN WHO ARE STRUGGLING TO DEFEND THEIR RIGHTS? WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS MOVEMENT?

That they continue moving forward, that they have patience, because we have to see, truly, if they manage to move forward.

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MORE INFORMATION

For more info about health issues and the context in which Goldcorp Inc. is operating its "Marlin" mine, read:

- See report "Investing in Conflict" about Goldcorp's operations across the Americas: <http://rightsaction.org/Reports/research.pdf>.
- See film "All That Glitters Isn't Gold" (<http://www.rightsaction.org/video/gold/>) that documents health and environmental harms related to Goldcorp's "San Martin" mine in Honduras.
- See film "8 Mayan Women" (http://www.rightsaction.org/articles/Eight_Women_112608.html)

WHAT TO DO

There is no easy way to help the mainly Mayan Mam villagers being harmed by this mine. Goldcorp Inc. has the full support of the governments of Canada and Guatemala; early on, the World Bank was an investor in and supporter of this mine.

It is fundamental that North American citizens hold Goldcorp Inc, its investors and shareholders and the American and Canadian governments accountable for the environmental and health harms and human rights violations being caused by Goldcorp Inc. in Guatemala, and elsewhere.

American and Canadian citizens should write to - and keep on writing to - their politicians, making them aware of these situations, demanding that our governments prioritize global human rights and environmental concerns over global business interests, demanding that our politicians use their power and authority to help hold our corporations accountable if/ when they violate human rights and/or cause environmental and health harms.

Canadians and Americans should write to and keep writing to their own Pension Funds and Investment Brokers – including the Canadian Pension Plan, to find out what types of corporations and businesses they are investing in, to demand that our investors prioritize global human rights and environmental concerns over profits, to insist that investments be withdrawn if/ when profits are being made at the expense of environmental and health harms and/ or human rights violations.

This is slow, long-term work. We need to make our governments, companies and investment firms accountable to us in all facets of global economic relations and policies.

ADDRESSES

Send a copy of this photo-essay, along with your own letter, to your own politicians, media, the company and your own investment firms or pension fund, demanding a response to your letters of concern and protest about this corporate and investment activity.

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