

Questioning why YWCA Metro Vancouver gave Goldcorp Inc. an “outstanding workplace” award?

July 27, 2015

YWCA Metro Vancouver
Janet Austin, C.E.O.
535 Hornby Street
Vancouver BC, V6C-2E8
[\(604\) 895 5800](tel:6048955800), enquire@ywcavan.org, <http://ywcavan.org/>

Questioning why YWCA Metro Vancouver gave Goldcorp Inc. an “outstanding workplace” award?

Dear Janet Austin, Members of the Board and YWCA friends,

I write concerning YWCA’s recent “outstanding workplace” award to Goldcorp Inc.

Firstly, I write as someone who, as a boy, went to YMCA summer day camps outside of Toronto for a number of years. Growing up, I benefitted from the vision and programmes of the YMCA, and I have never forgotten that.

My respect and thanks to the YWCA for your programmes and advocacy work to achieve women's equality, and “help lift women and families out of poverty, provide the best start for children and create new opportunities for education, employment and leadership.”

Secondly, I write as a father, a non-practising lawyer and an environmental and global justice and equality activist. Since 1995, I have been director of Rights Action, a tax-charitable organization that works in Guatemala and Honduras, funding and accompanying work and struggle for community-controlled development, as well as for environmental and human rights respect and protection.

This work has brought me into direct contact with people and communities that have suffered repression and human rights violations, environmental and health harms caused directly and indirectly by Goldcorp at and near its workplaces at the “San Martin” mine in Honduras (operating from 2000-2008) and the “Marlin” mine in Guatemala (operating since 2005).

If the YWCA properly investigates these issues in Honduras and Guatemala, I suspect you will have serious concerns about how Goldcorp is choosing to operate its mines in repressive, corrupted and impunity-ridden countries. You will arrive, I believe, at a different conclusion as to whether Goldcorp deserves your “outstanding work-place” award.

The Award

In naming Goldcorp a recipient of the “Outstanding Workplace” award, the YWCA writes:

“A global mining company, Goldcorp treats its people as its greatest asset. With a vision to build positive social, environmental and economic legacies, Goldcorp creates careers, supports community development and contributes to employee wellness. This vision is supported by programs tailored to employees to achieve professional development, wellness and community engagement – all while keeping employee safety paramount. The company promotes family-friendly policies such as family responsibility leave and programs that foster overall mental and physical health. Goldcorp has shown leadership and commitment to develop and advance women by launching Creating Choices, a training and mentoring program created by women for women at Goldcorp. It is the first global mining company to launch a women’s program, which, since 2010, has graduated more than 1,200 participants.”
(<http://www.ywcavan.org/blog/2015/05/announcing-2015-ywca-women-distinction-awards-recipients>)

The Record

Multiple and ongoing environmental and human rights abuses have been documented by numerous Guatemalan and international organizations. (On request, I would be glad to provide links.) An examination of Goldcorp’s record in Guatemala and Honduras demonstrates that Goldcorp:

- has not treated indigenous and campesino communities as “great assets”;
- has not created “positive social, environmental and economic legacies”;
- has not supported “community development”, as defined by the needs and requests of the local indigenous and campesino communities (that have very clear ideas of what their “development” needs and priorities are);
- has not successfully made “employee safety paramount”;
- has not created “family-friendly” workplaces and surrounding areas;
- has not “fostered overall mental and physical health”;
- has not “advanced women” in the communities where it operates.

Goldcorp’s operations are – directly and indirectly – resulting in the opposite of what the YWCA works for: “to achieve women’s equality,” and “to help lift women and families out of poverty, provide the best start for children and create new opportunities for education, employment and leadership.”

The contrast between what the award aims to honour, and how Goldcorp impacts the environment and Indigenous and campesino communities in and around its mines reveals a stark contrast between workplaces in the corporate offices in Canada, and workplaces in countries like Guatemala and Honduras. Is this what YWCA wants to highlight and celebrate?

Questions for YWCA

- Is the YWCA willing to host public screenings of documentary films about Goldcorp’s mine operations and workplaces in Honduras and Guatemala (and beyond), to acknowledge how complicated these issues are, and encourage public debate about Goldcorp’s operations?
- Will the YWCA consider sending staff and supporters on educational fact-finding trips to Honduras and Guatemala to visit with Goldcorp harmed communities and families? Rights Action regularly leads such delegations, and could ensure you direct visits and communication with mining harmed communities and people.
- What selection criteria did the YWCA use, and what background investigations did the YWCA carry out before awarding Goldcorp this award?
- Has the YWCA received financial donations from Goldcorp?

I thank the YWCA for your attention to these important questions. Hopefully this will start a dialogue.

Harms & Violations

I have visited Goldcorp's open-pit, cyanide-leaching gold and silver mining operations in Honduras and Guatemala dozens of times over the past 10 years, alone on fact-finding trips, and taking journalists and film-makers to document the issues, and leading numerous North American educational, fact-finding delegations.

What follows is a summary of negative impacts of Goldcorp's mining practices in Guatemala and Honduras. The documented facts are peoples' lived experiences.

No Consultation or Consent

Goldcorp began its mining explorations deceptively, through initial violations of the right to free, prior and informed consultation with and consent from affected campesino and indigenous communities. This initial violation was made possible by the well-documented lack of democracy, political oversight and rule of law in both countries, combined with a glaring lack of political and investor oversight and legal accountability in Canada.

Land Acquisitions

After failing to publicly inform and get informed consent from local communities, Goldcorp advanced its interests with illegal and/or forced land sales, and/or evictions of families and communities carried out by repressive police and military forces. These included: manipulated and/or pressured purchases of homes and properties from impoverished local families; the undervaluing of land; the paying of different prices to community members, creating divisions and tensions.

Low Income Jobs & Social Divisions

For many reasons, the mining operations have sowed serious social divisions in families and communities. One factor is that Goldcorp offers low-paid (\$150-200/ month), unskilled employment to poor, local men (and some women), preying on the poverty and generalized lack of employment, in this way putting family members against one another. It is impossible for these workers to unionize; for the most part, the jobs are short-term contracts, with few to no benefits.

The divisions are occurring in Guatemala and Honduras, societies that have not recovered from the trauma and legacy of the U.S.-backed State terrorism and repression of the 1960s-1990s. In both countries, repression continues today, almost unabated.

De-forestation has occurred due to the clear-cutting of the forests.

Air contamination has occurred due to the de-forestation and to the dust created by the use of explosives and heavy machinery to break up the mountains and rock.

Contamination of surface and underground water sources has occurred due to: de-forestation; use of explosives and heavy machinery to remove hills and mountains; use of massive amounts of cyanide in the processing plant (to separate the gold from earth and other minerals); the release of naturally occurring heavy metals (mercury, arsenic, lead) in dangerous quantities into the air and water sources, due to the explosives and destruction of mountains; the release and leakage of waste products from the processing plant and tailings pond.

Water contamination is combined with the **depletion of surface and underground water sources** due to use of vast quantities of water in Goldcorp's processing plants. This water depletion and contamination occurs in regions of both countries where "subsistence economy" campesinos and indigenous communities barely get through the annual dry season that lasts 6 to 8 months.

Peoples' **homes have cracked and crumbled**, due to the use of explosives in mountain-top removal and underground tunneling.

Fissures have opened in the ground, sometimes over 100m in length, due to the use of underground explosives to open the tunnels. In Guatemala, there are over 150 kilometers of tunnels.

Recurring **health harms** suffered by local populations (from babies to the elderly) due to contaminated air and water include: hair loss; skin rashes and diseases; blood contamination due to heavy metals; organ failure and complications due to blood contaminants; eye irritations; respiratory complications.

Repression

Related to all the above, repression has been used (including shootings and killings), particularly in Guatemala, against villagers who carry out community education and organization work to protest the mining related harms and violations. Repression includes the "criminalization of community and environmental defenders" - the laying of trumped up criminal charges in the corrupted legal system, on behalf of Goldcorp, against community members.

Impunity & Corruption: No Accountability, No Recourse

This list of Goldcorp linked harms and violations should not be surprising. As documented by many groups, including the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the U.S. State Department and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Guatemala and Honduras are known to have:

- the highest murder and violence rates in the Americas;
- some of the highest levels of State and private sector repression in the Americas;
- the highest levels of impunity in the Americas;
- the highest levels of corruption in the Americas

The communities and people suffering Goldcorp harms and violations have no remedy or recourse in any legal or political system, neither in Guatemala and Honduras, nor Canada.

On request, I can provide references to reports and articles about what is set out above. I can provide the names of groups in Canada and the U.S., Honduras and Guatemala that have investigated and reported on harms and violations caused by Goldcorp at and near their mining operations.

I refer you to two films:

Gold Fever

This award-winning film by Northland Films documents how Goldcorp continues to mine relentlessly in San Miguel Ixtahuacan and Sipacapa, Guatemala, despite 10 years of repression, human rights violations, environmental destruction, and endemic corruption and impunity. Gold Fever takes the viewer into the homes and communities of the courageous Mayan Mam people resisting the harms and violations, struggling for justice and a different "development" model.

- Trailer/Information: www.goldfevermovie.com/

All That Glitters Isn't Gold: A Story Of Exploitation And Resistance

This film by Steven Schnoor documents the lives of people residing near Goldcorp's open-pit/ mountain-top removal, cyanide-leaching gold mine in Honduras' Siria valley, and the devastating health harms and other violations they have suffered.

- Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tmqXc5rX8s>
- (Full film available on youtube.)

Yes, these are complicated issues, but I do not write this letter casually. The harms and violations caused directly and indirectly by Goldcorp should not be taken lightly. Massive profits keep flowing to Canada from Goldcorp's mining operations around the world, while systematic repression, violations and harms continue to occur in faraway places.

The profits are not 'trickling down' to the women and families of Guatemala and Honduras. Instead, all the benefits are for company directors and shareholders and for North American investors (pension and private funds). On top of that, with generous corporate donations, Goldcorp strategically maintains a glossy corporate reputation.

Thank you for considering the other side of the story. I look forward to your answers to the questions set out at the top, and to any comments or questions you have.

Grahame Russell, director
info@rightsaction.org, 416-807-4436
 Rights Action
 (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E.
 Toronto ON, M5A-1T8
 Canada

Get on/off listserv: www.rightsaction.org
www.facebook.com/rightsaction.org
<https://twitter.com/RightsAction>, @RightsAction

Tax-Deductible Donations

To support mining harmed campesino and indigenous communities, in Honduras and Guatemala, struggling FOR community-controlled development, human rights and the environment, struggling AGAINST the impunity and corruption of global mining companies and their governments, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- United States: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8
- Credit-Card Donations (Canada & U.S.): <http://www.rightsaction.org/tax-deductible-donations>
- To donate stock, contact: info@rightsaction.org

Delegation to Honduras, November 7-15, 2015

"Connecting the Dots from the Global to the Local: Understanding the Environmental, Human Rights, Poverty and Impunity Crisis in Honduras"

Rights Action and the Mir Centre for Peace at Selkirk College invite you to join this educational seminar trip to Honduras.

- Flyer: <http://rightsaction.org/action-content/honduras-education-seminar-trip>
- More info: info@rightsaction.org