



Marlin Mine: Devastating Indigenous Lands and Lives

By Richard Renshaw CSC

Members of the Social Justice Committee of Montreal discover the impacts of Canadian mining in Guatemala.

During a 2005 visit to Guatemala, a guide led a delegation from the Social Justice Committee of Montreal to a small posthole in the ground. “There is going to be a gold mine here,” he said. “It is owned by a Canadian company and you are Canadian.”

Last year, I joined another such delegation to revisit this spot. The open-pit Marlin gold mine now occupied an entire valley. In an enormous crater, huge machines dug out tonnes of earth each day. The tailings pond was a lake of refuse from the cyanide-based process used by the mine and unearthed arsenic and other heavy metals - its toxicity evidenced by the death of hundreds of birds who flew over the lake and strange new diseases among workers and nearby residents.



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Referendums held in nearly 50 communities nearby indicate that 90 percent of the people oppose the mine. However, as in most mining communities, people are polarized - some hoping for the few jobs available and others



A young boy shows the damage to his home resulting from the mine.
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resisting the environmental damage, health hazards and elimination of cultivatable land. In many cases, the conflict has become lethal. A woman who openly opposed the mine was shot in the head just days after our visit.

Added to violence and environmental and health concerns, women in the area complain Marlin's blasting has caused large cracks in the walls of their homes and that the company has illegally erected electrical towers on their land to carry cables to the mine. When they have attempted to resist, they have been beaten by police. Several have had arrest orders pending for more than a year.

Marlin is owned by Montana Explorada, a Guatemalan subsidiary of the Canadian corporation Goldcorp, one of the largest open-pit gold mining companies in the world. Goldcorp is very conscious of its image, particularly facing investors at annual shareholder meetings. The company publishes an extensive social responsibility report each year and its website portrays Goldcorp as "committed to responsible mining practices," open dialogue and transparency, and "sustainable prosperity for all."

Nevertheless, on May 24, 2010, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission asked the Guatemalan government to suspend operations at Marlin. Frustrated, I finally said it appeared the damages caused by the mine

were not an issue for the Canadian government. After a moment of blustering, he admitted it was true. There is simply too much at stake for the Canadian standard of living to let profits like that slip away.

For example, in 2008 the value of Marlin's mineral production was \$258.1 million (US). Only 5.8 percent of those earnings remained in Guatemala in the form of taxes and royalties paid the Guatemalan government while enormous profits went into the pockets of Goldcorp shareholders, including many large pension funds and banks.

When an attempt was made recently to exert even limited legislative control over Canadian companies operating abroad, the mining lobby mounted a frenzied self-defense and the bill was defeated by a small margin. Currently, 75 percent of all mining companies in the world are registered in Canada and the reason is quite simple. There are few, if any, restraints on what they can do.

However, opposition to mining practices like Marlin's is vigorous and growing, especially within the religious community. In Guatemala, Bishop Ramazzini, head of the diocese in which Marlin is located, has played an important role in keeping the issue before the government and the international community, Canadian churches have also spoken out against practices of mining companies at home and abroad. Within Holy Cross, the Canadian Province has established screens to ensure all its investments are socially responsible.



Mayan protest.

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As the pressure of public opinion and shareholder resolutions increase, it may be only a matter of time until the **Development and Peace** slogan holds sway: *Life Before Profit!*



No to mining, yes to life. Photo credit: Tracy Barnett. Used with permission.

