

Canada Pension Alert

What are your Pension funds Up to?

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A Shadow on the Land: Canadian Mining in Guatemala

By Dr. Rebekah Shoop

It had been an amazing day spent with school children and their parents,

excited at the prospect of a new, permanent school building to replace the existing school room, an precarious shack built of aluminum sheets and rough lumber in the tiny village of Bella Vista, perched on the edge of a hillside in the mountainous San Marcos Department of Guatemala. I remember Trinidad proudly guiding me through his orchard of peach trees in the valley bottom, then clambering back up to the village for a lunch of fresh watermelon, tortillas and hard-boiled eggs. The mood was optimistic, even joyous, until the first helicopter appeared over the peaks on the other side of the valley. It made its way down the length of the valley slowly, deliberately, then turned and made its way back towards us, hovered for a few moments like a malevolent flying insect, and disappeared back over the mountains. The smile slipped from Trinidad's face, replaced by worry lines I had never noticed before, and he slipped his battered straw hat towards the back of his head, running his calloused fingers through his hair.



“Estan buscando oro” he said, “They are looking for gold”. Every day for the past week the helicopters had appeared, in different parts of the Municipality of Comitancillo, and the rumors were flying.

Everyone in Comitancillo, it seemed, had heard about the mine in Honduras, in the Siria Valley, and, closer to home, in San Miguel Ixtahuacan, another Municipality in the Department of San Marcos, less than an hour's drive away. Local people in the Siria Valley had been left with a massive clean up when a mine, owned by the Canadian mining conglomerate GoldCorp, closed down without any plans for environmental rehabilitation, and many were facing health issues thought to be linked directly to toxic waste and water contamination from the mine. The San Miguel mine, known as the Marlin Mine, was one of GoldCorp's largest and most profitable mines in Latin America. Explorations had begun in 1998, under Montana Exploradora (now the Guatemalan subsidiary of GoldCorp), the mine opened in 2005 under Glamis, and in 2006 was purchased by GoldCorp, based in Vancouver, B.C.

The huge, open pit Marlin Mine straddles the border of two municipalities, with about 85% of it in San Miguel Ixtahuacan, and the other 15% in Sipakapa. In 2005 a documentary, *Sipakapa no se vende* (Sipakapa is not for sale) was released which documented the resistance of the Mayan community to the further development of mining projects in their territory. In accordance with the International Labour Organization Convention 169, to which Guatemala is a signatory nation, the citizens of Sipakapa held a Community Consultation, or referendum, in which 96% of the votes were against further mining projects.



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Despite the fact that the ILO Convention clearly establishes that Indigenous people must be allowed to “engage in free, prior, and informed participation in policy and development processes that affect them”, the results of the referendum were not given any consideration by the Ministry of Natural Resources when they were presented to the government at a press conference by a delegation of community leaders, supported by a large number of villagers who made the arduous trip to Guatemala City to voice their opposition to the mine.

The Guatemalan government never suspended operations at the Marlin Mine despite an order from the Inter American Commission on Human Rights. Although this order was lifted about one year later, the environmental and human rights concerns were never fully addressed by the Guatemalan Government, and in 2011 a report by two researchers from Tufts University's Global Development and Environment Institute, found that the long term environmental risks significantly outweighed any economic benefits.

Since that day in Bella Vista, there have been many more protests.

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A delegation from Comitancillo travelled to the Capital in 2006 to protest any further exploration by mining companies, and an anti-mining protest in the center of town when government officials came to visit in 2008 drew about 5000 people from their homes in the surrounding mountains. For Canadians like myself, living and travelling in Guatemala became increasingly uncomfortable as we faced pointed questions and a great deal of suspicion about what we were doing in the country. In fact, I was warned more than once not to travel to some of the more remote, isolated villages where rumors ran wild and vigilantism was not unheard of.

In 2007 I had the privilege of meeting with the core group of leaders at the center of the Sipakapa referendum described earlier. They went on to form a municipal political party and ran in, and won, the Mayoral elections on a platform of social justice and resistance to mining.

In 2009, a delegation of volunteers with Alianza (a small nonprofit organization which offers scholarships and support for a community health center and programming in Comitancillo) visited the Departmental capital of San Marcos --- in the center of town there were several large murals depicting the effects of mining, and placing the finger of blame squarely on North American mining companies and their Guatemalan subsidiaries such as GoldCorp and Montana Exploradora.

More recently, in March of 2012, the Campesino Committee of the Highlands (CCDA) organized a march that started with 1500 people, and ended with over 15,000 people as the protest march came to an end in the Capital, 213 km and almost a week later. Along the highway, thousands of supporters came out to offer water, food and encouragement to the marchers.

The organizers wanted to outline many of their ideas for reform of the Guatemala legislative assembly, among them the guaranteed right for indigenous people to have a say in what happens in their own homeland, and more specifically they protested the heavy handed way in which the government and the foreign mining companies have dealt with communities who resist mining exploration in their territories. Here are a few examples:

At the Tambor mine site owned by the Canadian company Radius Gold,

members of the nearby towns of San Jose del Golfo and San Pedro Ayampuc had staged a peaceful blockade which began March 1, 2012. Very few jobs at the mine had gone to local people, and a very low percentage of the royalties had flowed into the local communities. On May 8, 400 police surrounded the community of San Jose at 1 a.m. No one could come in or out of the village. 24 hours later the police drew back, but the message to the villagers was clear, and left them anxious and intimidated (especially in the context of a country where an armed conflict between the army and the guerilla had raged for 36 years, trapping civilians in an impossible situation between the two sides).

On June 13, 2012, Yolanda Oquely Veliz, an anti-mining activist, was leaving the site of the blockade at the Tambor mine when she was shot by two men on motorcycles at close range. She survived, but spent several weeks in hospital in serious condition.

At the Marlin mine in San Miguel, Carmen Mejia, also an activist against the effects of mining on her community, received a threatening note, telling her "you should not defend human rights or you'll be killed".

In July 2012, Carmen's fellow activist, Deodora Hernandez, was shot in the eye at close range while speaking out about the impact of the mine on her community's water supply.

If you belong to Amnesty International, you may have heard about their campaign, which started in April of 2012 to bring to light the controversy surrounding the eventual closure of the Marlin mine. GoldCorp developed a closure and clean up plan without the participation of the Mayan communities around the mine site, and analysts were concerned that the plan vastly underestimated closure costs (in fact, GoldCorp originally pledged only \$1 million towards clean up costs which they estimated at \$17 million in total, whereas outside analysts estimated the costs at closer to \$49 million) and did not account for long term maintenance costs of keeping toxic waste out of soil and groundwater. I don't need to tell you that the communities of Sipakapa and San Miguel,

which are struggling to provide enough desks in their classrooms and medicine in their health centres, cannot afford \$49 million to clean up a mine from which most of the profits have long since left the region. In contrast, "Goldcorp's CEO is among Canada's 0.01% of top tax-filers and the company's assets now supersede the real GDP of Guatemala," says Jen Moore, Latin Program Coordinator for MiningWatch Canada. "This company can afford to adequately close its mines without further burdening affected communities."

Amnesty also points out that the Canadian Pension Plan has \$177 million invested in GoldCorp, which in effect makes us all shareholders.

Small wonder, then, that the sight of those helicopters passing overhead cast a shadow over that happy gathering on a sunny hillside seven years ago. Despite government efforts to portray them as such, the Mayan people of Guatemala are not backwards, naive, easily manipulated people--- they resist the mining companies because they have seen the negative impacts with their own eyes: mines upstream from towns and villages sending acid mine drainage from rock waste piles into streams and rivers, companies throwing their weight around with local government officials when protestors call a halt to their projects because of human rights abuses, thugs (some of them employees of the mining companies) mysteriously appearing to intimidate anti-mining activists, homes cracking from the detonation of explosives to open up mining pits, an increase in the prevalence of respiratory and skin ailments, a decrease in the water supply, and the loss of arable land (already a precious and dwindling resource). The Mayan people have suffered this kind of oppression and marginalization since 1492 – they can surely recognize it in 2012. And ultimately what it comes down to is this: the people have spoken, and they have said No. You can't eat gold, as the protestors from Sipakapa and Comitancillo so eloquently stated in their meeting with the Minister of Natural Resources in 2005. It is time that the Canadian government and Canadian mining companies respect the rights of indigenous people in Guatemala, and if they refuse, then Canadians need to vote with their dollars and speak out against the cynical exploitation that is harming families and devastating communities.

According to the 2011 annual report, **Vancouver Island University's** College Pension Plan has \$12,207,000 invested in GoldCorp.



Rebekah Shoop would like to acknowledge the following Sources:

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