
Argentina: One year after the Esquel "NO", a national network against mining is born

On 4 December, thousands of people from cities and villages in the Provinces of Chubut and Rio Negro again marched together with the neighbours of Esquel to say "NO to the Mine." This reaffirmation by the people took place in the midst of a new mining encroachment, as personnel of these corporations are scouring the outskirts of Cholila (in Chubut, a few kilometres from the Los Alerces National Park). If mining activities continue, various lake systems and the Patagonian Andean forest will be endangered. The fear of the population is no longer over the initiation of exploitation, but over the very stage of exploration itself. In this phase, the mining company Meridian Gold contaminated the rivers of Esquel (Huemules and Willa) and the Barrick Gold Company dumped hydrocarbons in groundwater in the province of San Juan (Valle del Cura – Pascua Lama Project).

The contagious firmness of the people of Esquel, who do not bow to the threats and attacks against the premises of the "Self-convened Neighbours for NO," and the seriousness of the mining threat led to a meeting in Buenos Aires on 24 and 25 November of delegations from Catamarca, San Juan, Chubut, Tucuman, Cordoba and Rio Negro, where they set up the National Network of Communities affected by Mining.

The meeting provided an opportunity for the delegates to get to know the problems of the centre, west and northwest of Argentina. The testimonials of the Catamarca and Tucuman delegations, affected by the exploitation of the Bajo La Alumbraera gold deposits, were conclusive. This activity compromises the Sali-Dulce basin and contamination is not only having an impact on these provinces but also on Santiago del Estero, Cordoba and Santa Fe. The Tucuman representative warned that the "yunga" forest (dry tropical forest) is threatened by the implementation of 37 mining enterprises.

The delegation from San Juan repeated this warning and stated that the exploitation of the Veladero gold mine, to take place shortly, will compromise the Jachel River basin and affect the San Guillermo Biosphere Reserve (declared World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1984).

Although the future looks gloomy, the firmness of the Esquel population and of the neighbouring villages constitute a ray of hope that people will grow in number and courage in Argentina, in their awareness of the danger they are facing.

By: Hernan Scandizzo, e-mail: herscan@data54.com