
Argentina: Echoes of the plebiscite against Canadian mining exploitation

The streets of the Patagonian town of Esquel still echo with the celebrations held on the resounding victory of "NO" which obtained 81% of the non-binding plebiscite held on 23 March. The monstrous governmental-company propaganda machinery was unable to convince the population to give its support to the exploitation of a gold and silver mine, located some 6 kilometres from the town. The most important town in the Chubut cordillera, inhabited by some 30 thousand people, said NO, and Mining Argentina trembled.

Both the provincial and municipal governments --in favour of "YES"-- had to announce that they would respect the people's will. However, the Federal Mining Council (Consejo Federal Minero - CoFeMin) comprising representatives of the mining provinces ignore the people's will and the Canadian mining company, Meridian Gold Inc. has stated that it will not renounce its extractive intentions.

In the fervour of victory, on 29 March hundreds of inhabitants of Esquel symbolically closed the access route to the deposits. Furthermore, on 2 April, the local Deliberating Council, promulgated an ordinance declaring Esquel a "Non Toxic and Environmentally Sustainable" Municipality. This ordinance prohibits "industrial and mining activities that use leaching with toxic products or any other technique that requires the use of explosives and toxic inputs, or techniques that release into the atmosphere substances of any kind that on their own or in combination with others, could be toxic and/or noxious to human health, to natural resources as a whole, water, soil, flora, fauna, landscape, sources of conventional and non conventional energy and atmosphere, on the basis of environmental values."

Through this ordinance, the zone of mountains, peaks and edges located within the municipal lands, was declared a Specially Protected Landscape Area, in order to preserve its natural characteristics.

For a few days Esquel, a town unknown to millions of Argentines, was the news on the front page of several newspapers. Suddenly it had become incorporated into the global village and the 2000 km separating it from Buenos Aires, seat of political and economic power, had disappeared. Devaluation of Argentine currency has been the signal awaited by companies to start the mining cycle, a new cycle of economy for the country, according to the estimates of the Under-secretariat for Mining. However, the undertaking chosen as a national milestone is resisted by the people.

The promotion policy launched in the nineties, with the exploitation of the gold deposits of Bajo La Alumbrera in Catamarca, and Cerro Vanguardia in Santa Cruz, has suffered an unexpected setback.

Some sights have already been aimed at the Province of San Juan, located in the central west of Argentina, due to the unrest generated in the population by the contamination of the Valle del Cura area. Following an investigation by the local Mining Council in the Lama gold fields, toxic waste was found buried high up the mountain. According to this body, the Barrick Exploraciones Argentina S.A., a company with Canadian capital, did not fulfil commitments taken on in the Environmental Impact Report and will have to pay a fine of some US\$80 thousand.

In view of this finding, the "Prensa Geo Minera" publication, linked to interests in the sector, warned a few months ago that "If (Barrick) does not prepare a concrete information programme on environmental protection and relations with the communities, both undertakings (the gold mines at San Juan, Lama and Veladero) could see their implementation endangered, as has happened recently with the gold exploitation project at Esquel, the property of the Meridian Gold company."

While in the province of Catamarca, in the Northeast of Argentina, complaints continue against the leaks in the tailings dike at the gold mine at Bajo La Alumbrera. Contamination from acid leaks in the basin of the Vis Vis River could endanger the north of Argentina's greatest water reserve.

It is true that the Esquel plebiscite does not have any legal force, but it has the enormous power of embodying the people's freely expressed feelings against environmental destruction by mining activities. It also represents the feelings of other peoples which are suffering from the impact of mining in Argentina and which now see Esquel as an example to be followed. With their vote in the plebiscite, the inhabitants of Esquel have placed the mining sector in general and a Canadian company in particular, in a very weak situation.

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