
Argentina: Peoples and forests threatened by Canadian mining company

The city of Esquel is located in an enclave on the banks of the Esquel river, between hills with slopes forming an impressive amphitheatre, set off by the marginal forests of the sub-Antarctic forest region and in particular, the Valdiviana forest in the Province of Chubut, to the West of the Argentine Patagonia. Its 31,000 inhabitants live and enjoy surroundings that they describe as a city where nature surprises travellers at all seasons because of the landscapes of unusual beauty, thousand-year old trees, rivers and hundreds of pools and lakes protected by enigmatic forests. The city's inhabitants are proud to announce that they cultivate respect and care of nature. They belong to a region where "we who inhabit it, hope that our children and grandchildren can enjoy it."

This feeling does not seem to be of much importance to those promoting the installation of a mining plant using cyanide treatment for gold exploitation at only 5 kilometres up-river from this beautiful city. Unfortunately, this is only the first of many mining extraction projects that will affect the whole Patagonia Andean region and in general, all the Argentine and Chilean Andes Cordillera, thanks to the privileges granted to multinational companies with the Mining Integration Treaty, signed in December 1997.

Gold mining is one of the most destructive and contaminating activities. Works in Esquel in particular would be extremely depredating, as they would be done by dynamiting 42,000 tons of rock per day, of which 3,000 tons would be ground to dust and then treated with sodium cyanide dissolved in water. As a result, the consumption of water would immediately increase, with the potential depletion of rivers, lagoons and springs used in the fields and in the city.

It is expected that there would be sound-related problems due to the explosions and generation of dust, particularly during the summer, together with risks of accidents of all kinds during the transportation and use of these enormous quantities of cyanide, considered as one of the most potent poisons known, in addition to sulphuric acid and other lethal compounds. The inhabitants' quality of life would be enormously affected, as stated in a recent report prepared by the National Network of Ecologist Action, RENACE. The complete text of this report may be found in <http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Argentina/esquel.html> . Additionally, the tourist potential of this region, renowned internationally for its pristine nature, would be irreversibly affected.

Making use of the facilities and privileges granted by the government --such as total tax exoneration-- Meridian Gold, a multinational company with majority Canadian capital owner of 90% of the shares of the Argentine company, El Desquite S.A., would obtain profits in excess of 1,000 million dollars, "in exchange for some dozens of work-posts and practically non-existent royalties," the RENACE report also claims.

The company has spared no measures to convince the local population that there will be no contamination or toxic emissions, boasting about the myth of Canadian companies' environmental responsibility. However, it is well-known that it is only a myth, as "the worst social and ecological impacts of the past fifteen years can be ascribed to some of the country's [Canada] biggest enterprises, backed by their most respected private, financial, and governmental institutions",

according to the WRM report on Canadian mining companies, available at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/mining.html>

Both reports contain examples of the irresponsible action of the companies and of the resulting environmental disasters. However, the companies use all kinds of methods to prevent the population from reacting while they "empty the mountains": they take them to visit other countries, give talks to the community and threaten those who oppose them.

The same scheme has been repeated in Esquel. A group of neighbours recently travelled to Antafogasta in the North of Chile, as guests of the company, to visit a mining project carried out in the middle of the most arid desert in the world, that in no way can be compared to the neighbouring Los Alerces National Park, where forests of over 2000 years old of *Fitzroya cupressoides* grow, a true natural shrine.

The Municipal Auditorium of Esquel was also the scene of a shameful conference --due to the accumulation of errors and inaccuracies-- given by a representative of Dupont, one of the companies that will possibly be selling the cyanide, while local representatives of the Mining Office distributed Dupont leaflets and the Director of Mining himself helped to project the slides.

To complete this picture, Dr. Silvia González, a teacher and research worker at the National University of Patagonia, received threats by telephone after having presented the city's schools with a scientific paper on the effects of cyanide.

In spite of all this, this community, like the communities of Tambogrande in Peru, Los Encuentros in Ecuador, Plananlto in Colombia, San Carlos in Costa Rica, are ready to defend their lands, their forests and their quality of life, and to demand the national authorities not to allow this plundering to take place.