Chile: Forests burnt to substitute them by monoculture tree plantations

The Mapuche Coordination of Arauco-Malleco Communities in Conflict denounced that the large scale fires that burnt down some 53,000 hectares of native forests in the south of Chile last February, creating what was defined as an “environmental tragedy,” were caused intentionally by the sectors and bodies linked to the major forestry companies.

For some years now, this corparate sector has been receiving state support in Chile. In 1977, the Military Junta, headed by the dictator General Augusto Pinochet, promulgated a decree which subsidised monoculture pine and eucalyptus tree plantations. What had been presented as a project for the benefit of medium-sized farmers --who reconverted their agricultural lands into forestry-- in the end mainly benefited the major forestry companies, who took over approximately 95% of these lands. This formed the material basis of production that they presently hold. They are now attempting to expand their investments and increase the present 2.5 million hectares they own, to 6 million hectares.

In addition to the active opposition of the Mapuche people, this plan also faces the “problem” that a major part of the area to be planted is covered by forests and that the country has a legal and institutional framework which is supposed to protect native forests. Then how can these forests be substituted “legally” by pine-tree and eucalyptus plantations? The reply to such a dilemma has not been long in coming.

As if by accident, serious fires broke out in the region in February. They devastated and affected reserve zones, destroying araucaria forests and other native species such as oak, tepa, coigüe and raulí. It is for this reason that the Mapuche Coordination considers that with the fires, the companies have achieved the concretion of their strategy for accumulation and growth, for which land and forests are no more than the fixed assets of production. Their claim is also based on the reports on the fires produced by the responsible state technical bodies, but which have not been made public.

The Coordination considers that the next step in the strategy for the expansion of forestry companies is to try and involve Chilean farmers resident in these zones in the indiscriminate exploitation of the remains of the forests damaged by the fires and in the sale of the wood, thus clearing the land for future tree plantations.

The burning down of Chilean forests has no doubt implied a serious loss of biodiversity. But in the event that the forecasts made by the Mapuche Coordination are fulfilled, biodiversity will loose out twice over. The “green invasion,” the great tidal wave of eucalyptus or pine trees, all the same, lined up over kilometres and kilometres, with a ground almost totally bare of other species of flora and fauna, advancing and covering on its way hills and mountains, sucking up the water from streams and wells, in a landscape that is repeated in so many other countries, will be another stab at Chilean biological diversity.

The country still maintains the experience and ancestral memory of other ways of relating to the earth and to its products. The Mapuche have integrated respect and love of Mother Earth and the diversity

of life of the various species that live in the native forests into their cosmo-vision. When the centre of the universe is not to profit at other people's expense, nor the excluding human being, it is possible to consider the creation of more just and supportive structures, in a reconstruction of a social, economic and cultural nature, based on diversity.

At a time when the commitments for the conservation of forests taken on by the countries within the Convention on Biological Diversity are being put on the agenda once again, Chilean representatives have an excellent opportunity to recover this current, that holds an enormous mass of knowledge acquired over thousands of years and that in its time, knew how to maintain the balance between human beings and nature.

Article based on information from "Los grandes incendios del sur de Chile tienen su origen en la demanda incontrolada de las empresas forestales", Equipo Nizkor, sent by Elsbeth Vocat,