

**It's bigger than bling bling and the banks:**  
**Invoking an anti-capitalist praxis in activism against injustices at mines**

By Tracy Glynn<sup>1</sup>

Mining has historically been and continues to be a male-dominated industry. Disturbing stories of women affected by mining shared here demand our thoughtful analysis and action. Women have and continue to resist the onset of mining and its various impacts but their resistance and self-determination are hindered by the global economic system driven by private accumulation, namely capitalism, and patriarchal ideologies that serve to reinforce capitalism. Global campaigns supporting communities affected by mining will be discussed. Finally, an anti-capitalist praxis will be invoked to help us reflect critically on the activism against injustices, such as gender-based violence, found at mine sites.

Women struggle with a deeply rooted patriarchy that is expressed in one form of male views dominating decision-making at mine sites, in communities and at all levels of governance.<sup>2</sup> Women are further oppressed by structural classism and racism. As Carmen Mejía, a 25 year old Mayan activist against the Goldcorp mine in Guatemala, daughter of peasants and the single mother of a five year old remarked in May 2010, "We are not heard because we are women, we are indigenous and we are *campesinas*."

Several academics and non-governmental organizations argue that mining disproportionately affects women.<sup>3</sup> Some of the documented impacts of mining on women include: restricted access to and loss of livelihoods; restricted access to and loss of sources of drinking water and food; increased workload; increased economic dependency on men; forced precarious work like prostitution; increases in sexually transmitted diseases; and workplace discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup> Previously non-existent societal ills that tend to affect women to a greater degree follow the establishment of mines including conflict within the community, violence, domestic abuse, substance abuse and impoverishment.<sup>5</sup> Various health problems are associated with heavy metals and dust released into the environment by mineral extraction, processing and refining.<sup>6</sup>

There are many stories across the globe of women at the forefront of courageous struggle against harmful developments. In Guatemala, women are part of local councils organizing "consultas" or referenda that allow community members to vote on whether a large industrial project, like a mine, proceeds in their community. The Guatemalan government is ignoring the consulta results and therefore violating their own laws and international conventions that they have signed on obtaining the consent of indigenous peoples when it comes to developments such as mining in their territories. In the

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  - 2 Mercier, L., J.J. Gier. Eds. 2006. *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670 to the Present*. NY: Palgrave-MacMillan.
  - 3 International Women and Mining Network (RIMM). 2010. *Defending Land, Life & Dignity: Women from Mine Affected Communities Speak Out*. Hyderabad, India: SAMATA.
  - 4 Ibid.
  - 5 International Women and Mining Network (RIMM). 2010. *Defending Land, Life & Dignity: Women from Mine Affected Communities Speak Out*. Hyderabad, India: SAMATA.
  - 6 Coumans, C. et al. 2009. *Mining and Health: A Community-Centred Health Assessment Toolkit*. Ottawa: Canary Research Institute for Mining, Environment, and Health.

1990s, Innu women, using civil disobedience and the courts, temporarily halted the opening of one of the world's largest nickel mines in Labrador.<sup>7</sup> In Ecuador in 2009, Lina Solana was charged with public disorder and arrested for protesting the Canadian-owned IAMGOLD mine that she said would destroy protected Amazonian forests. "There is a lot of verbal aggression from the police towards females protesting against the mines. They call us sluts and smelly Indian," remarked Solana.<sup>8</sup>

An examination of the history of colonialism and capitalist interventions in mine-affected communities is important towards helping us to understand why conditions are so dire in these communities today. Guatemala, a country characterized by extreme poverty and violence against women, has suffered 500 years of colonialism followed by severe repression and fear imposed by the country's oligarchy and its military, foreign governments such as the United States, and foreign companies such as American banana king, the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita) and Canadian nickel giant, Inco (now Brazilian-owned Vale). Mama Maquin and an estimated 50 others were murdered in the town square of Panzos in eastern Guatemala as they protested nickel mining by Inco on their land in 1978. Mama Maquin led the march in Panzós on the day of the massacre. She was there with her daughter, grandson and granddaughter. Only her granddaughter, Maria, survived the march.<sup>9</sup> Maria told an audience in Guatemala City in May 2010 that the killers of her mother, brother and grandmother live in her community today. They have never been punished. Despite fearing for her life, she is not giving up her quest to bring the masterminds behind the crime to justice.

In recent years, different companies have taken over the original Inco concession in the nickel-rich hills near Lake Izabal. In early 2007, about 700 armed men, including the police, private security and the army, evicted five Mayan Q'eqchi' communities while the concession was held by Vancouver-based Skye Resources. Homes and crops were burned to the ground. Tear gas canisters and shots were fired into the air.<sup>10</sup> The testimony of Kim Tiul, clearly distressed by the razing of her home and community, was recorded and posted online. When shown the video, Kenneth Cook, the Canadian Ambassador to Guatemala at the time, claimed that Kim Tiul was a paid actress and the video of the eviction was from the civil war era. Steven Schnoor, who shot the video, successfully sued the Canadian government and the former Ambassador for defamation.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary feminist theorists, including Angela Davis<sup>12</sup> and Andrea Smith<sup>13</sup>, have noted that the bodies of politically active women, working-class black women and indigenous women are destroyed differently than are the bodies of men. Women's bodies are raped to quell their resistance and their community's resistance. In Parliamentary committees, Harvard law professors are testifying that women in Papua New Guinea have been raped, many gang-raped, by Barrick Gold's security guards. Women are being forced to swallow the condoms that the men use in the rapes.<sup>14</sup> Davis calls sexual assaults "One of the telling dysfunctions of the present day capitalist society."<sup>15</sup> The people of one of the razed communities in Guatemala, Lot 8, had nowhere else to go after the eviction, so they returned to their lands to rebuild. Eight days later, hundreds of police, army and private security also returned

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7 Lowe, M. 1998. *Premature Bonanza: Standoff at Voisey's Bay*. Toronto: Between the Lines.

8 Hopkins, K. 2009. Women Fight South American Mines. *The Guardian*. Oct. 12, 2009.

9 Sanford, V. 2000. The Silencing of Maya women from Mama Maquin to Rigoberta Menchu. *Social Justice* 27(1): 128-151.

10 Paley, D. 2007. This is What Development Looks Like. *The Dominion*. Jan. 11, 2007.

11 Balkissoon, D. 2010. Former Canadian ambassador guilty of slander. *Toronto Star*. June 17, 2010.

12 Davis, A. 1983. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage Books.

13 Smith, A. 2005. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Cambridge: South End Press.

14 Whittington, L. 2009. MPs told of gang rapes at mine. *Toronto Star*. November 24, 2009.

15 Davis, A. 1983. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage Books.

but found only women and children. The community's men were off in the fields. Elena Choc Quib has told Canadians wanting to act in solidarity with her to repeat that, on January 17th, 2007, she was beaten and raped by eight armed men carrying out the eviction. She miscarried the child she was eight months pregnant with at the time. Rosa Elbira Coc Ich says she was sexually assaulted by nine men, including several uniformed mine security guards. She says she is no longer able to have children. Eleven women are coming forward saying they were raped, some gang-raped, by the security forces for the mine. Another Canadian mining company, HudBay, later took over the nickel project from Skye Resources. Angelica Choc is taking HudBay to court in Canada for the gruesome murder of her husband, a teacher and vocal mine opponent. The women who say they were raped are also taking HudBay to court in Canada.<sup>16</sup>

Women at the forefront of resistance to the Goldcorp gold and silver mine in the San Marcos highlands of western Guatemala fear for their lives because of their opposition to the mine. Crisanta Perez has become the face of resistance to the Goldcorp mine. She cut power lines to the mine that were placed on her plot of land. She was charged and when women came to her side to support her, they were also charged and became known as the Goldcorp 8. The mine has pitted family members against each other. Days after the Guatemalan government, under international pressure, called for the shut down of the mine in June 2010, a local mine resister, Dona Maria Cinto, was shot in the face in her home. She survived but local opponents continue to face attacks, detentions and death threats. When asked if she will leave her plot of land and give up, Cinto said, "Here, I remain, standing, like a tree."<sup>17</sup>

Rima Mananta says that, a half century ago, fertile land on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi was stolen from the Karonsi'e Dongi indigenous community in the midst of a rebellion and resource grab. Inco was granted control over their lands to mine and smelt nickel and play golf in the late 1960s. Rima is part of efforts to restore, live and work on the land that she says is integral to the survival of her people's indigenous identity. In November 2006, Rima travelled across Atlantic Canada to talk to Canadians about her community's struggle with Inco. She commented: "Our children are not able to go to school because parents cannot afford school fees. To feed our families, we women have planted vegetables and bananas around our huts. We can no longer grow rice because the land has been degraded. In 2003, the police and Inco security threatened to burn our huts because we were on 'Inco land.' Some of us were brought to the police station, interrogated and threatened with a three-month jail sentence." In desperate attempts to defend their land, the Sorowako community is turning to hostage-taking of Inco workers, hunger strikes, road blockades and the occupation of the Inco regional office.

### **Invoking an anti-capitalist praxis in the activism against injustices at mine sites**

Praxis, a reflective process in which ideas are practiced, is needed in movements for social transformation. Praxis, the marrying of theory and practice, involves acting with a strategic purpose. Though they have created and perpetuated numerous inequalities along lines of gender, ethnicity, class and international hierarchies of states, colonialism and capitalism have been wilfully ignored. The failure to name and counter the economic system has plundered the natural world and its resources and dehumanized women, men and children in countless corners of the earth. The horrendous effects of capitalism, the irrational, profit-driven private ownership of the means of production, are blatantly

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16 CBC. 2011. Unfinished Business. *CBC The Sunday Edition*. Sept. 25, 2011. Online: <http://www.cbc.ca/video/news/audioplayer.html?clipid=2141604355>

17 Russell, G. 2011. Diodora Hernandez: No tenga pena (don't you worry about it), I continue in resistance to the gold mine. Rights Action. Accessed: [www.rightsaction.org/articles/Diodora\\_Hernandez\\_071411.html](http://www.rightsaction.org/articles/Diodora_Hernandez_071411.html)

obvious to the workers and people affected by mining operations.

In periods of bust in capitalist economies, policies that squeeze workers and oppress indigenous peoples are claimed as necessary but in reality only serve to maintain accumulation of private sector wealth. Theft and destruction of indigenous lands and culture are defended by appealing to the racist notion that indigenous people are incapable of their own development. Women, young people, oppressed minorities, and marginal workers serve to fill the ranks of what Karl Marx called capital's "reserve army of labour,"<sup>18</sup> where people have no other choice but to toil in unsafe conditions. Thousands of miners die in mining accidents each year. In 2010 alone, over 2,400 people were killed in China's coal mines. In 2011, 35 year old Jason Chenier and 26 year old Jordan Fram were killed in mines in Sudbury, Ontario. Mines are just as dangerous for workers as they were in my great-grandfather's time when he did not come home from a shift in a Minto coal mine in 1950.

Host countries facilitate the exploitation of their mineral rich lands by foreign and domestic companies for foreign exchange or paltry royalties. The role of governments in host countries has been to play the obedient caretaker for mining capital through passing mining-friendly laws, weakening environmental, labour and health standards and privatizing natural resources, including minerals and water. To instill fear, subjugate the population and break social movements, violence is exercised by state police, army, paramilitaries, the company's private security and hired goons. People critical of mining in their backyards in Ecuador, Tanzania, Indonesia and elsewhere have been charged and incarcerated because their acts of dissent are equated with acting against national state interests.

Sixty per cent of the world's mining companies are registered in Canada. In 2009, the *Toronto Star* reported that claims of abuse committed by Canadian mining companies exist in at least 30 countries.<sup>19</sup> The Canadian government is opposing calls to regulate mining corporations at home and abroad. Mining companies benefit from Canada's exertion of power and influence in foreign countries. Canadian mining interests are openly defended by Canadian government officials, embassy representatives and trade councils, as seen in Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia. Large non-governmental organizations like Plan Canada, WUSC and World Vision Canada are partnering with mining companies to carry out projects in communities where they operate. The partnerships, publicly-funded through CIDA, are criticized for affecting the rights, bargaining position and resistance of local communities.<sup>20</sup>

Banks, international financial institutions, ethical funds, publicly-funded export credit agencies and pension funds like the Canadian Pension Plan are targets of protest and reform because of their financial backing of controversial developments across the globe. Export Development Canada funded China's Three Gorges Dam that displaced an estimated 1.4 million people.<sup>21</sup> The World Bank has pressured governments to rewrite their mining laws to be more friendly to foreign investors, to privatize state-controlled mines, and to grant individual land titles over collectively-owned land; the schemes have paved the way for companies to gain easy access to land and rich mineral resources. Members of the United Church of Canada and the Public Service Alliance of Canada who support communities affected by Goldcorp were shocked to learn that their pensions were invested in Goldcorp. Protests follow shareholders' meetings of companies such as Goldcorp, Inco and Barrick.

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18 Marx, K. 1867. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1.

19 Whittington, L. 2009. MPs told of gang rapes at mine. *Toronto Star*. November 24, 2009.

20 Arnold, R. 2012. Peruvians Oppose CIDA's Joint CSR Initiative with Barrick Gold and World Vision. Accessed: <http://www.miningwatch.ca/article/peruvians-oppose-cida-s-joint-csr-initiative-barrick-gold-and-world-vision>

21 Ford, F. 2011. Controversial Three Gorges dam has problems, admits China. *The Christian Science Monitor*. May 19, 2011.

University-partnerships like Memorial University of Newfoundland's partnership with Inco (now Vale) and University of Toronto's partnership with Barrick Gold's Peter Munk have been protested by students and faculty because of the companies' human rights track records.

Consumer-based campaigns like No Dirty Gold, by EarthWorks, attempt to educate consumers about "where the gold in their products comes from, or how it is mined."<sup>22</sup> Many people are outraged when they learn that water sources for entire communities are being destroyed for gold rings. Jewelry retailers like Tiffany's and university students buying class rings have been targeted for purchasing "unethical gold." Walmart's fair trade line of Love, Earth jewelry was supposed to be sourced responsibly but last year it was revealed that Love, Earth's gold comes from Utah and Nevada mines responsible for widespread pollution.<sup>23</sup> John Bellamy Foster and others argue that the intention of proposed reforms and campaigns are noble as they aim to promote social and environmental justice, but that, "such proposals seek to strike an accord with neoliberal institutions while leaving the underlying logic of the system intact."<sup>24</sup> Murray Smith argues that our attention on free trade and economic nationalism has deflected attention away from structurally-rooted crisis tendencies of advanced capitalism. Alternative budgets, the Tobin tax and capital controls still accept the capitalist order framework. Smith argues for a renewed commitment to class struggle informed by Marx's critique of political economy.<sup>25</sup>

Feminist scholars and activists addressing women's oppression and gender inequality at mine sites demand gender analysis and planning in all phases of mining. They demand justice for women who have been physically and sexually attacked at their work place or in their community by one of many security apparatuses used by a mining company.<sup>26</sup> Marxists argue that divisions of workers along lines of gender, ethnicity and international hierarchies of states serve to maintain the exploitative class system. A class-based approach is key to informed and effective action geared towards eliminating the inequality and subordination faced by all workers including women miners and women affected by mining.

The ruling elite control not just the economy but also the state, courts and media, making it extremely difficult for the masses to effect fundamental changes that the powerful minority opposes. The police, military, managers, judges and others identify more with the elite than with the working class because of material interests that tie them to the capital owning class. The effects of such a system are described by anti-poverty activist John Clarke, "In the jails across Canada, rapacious employers, slum landlords, and polluters of the environment are conspicuously absent. 'Crime' is an intensely class-based concept in terms of both definition and application. It is as if sucking blood was a criminal offence for mosquitoes but not for vampire bats."<sup>27</sup>

Efforts towards ending violence against women and enacting better social welfare, more stringent environmental regulations and anything that betters workers' lives are important. However, powerful forces are opposed to reforms that hinder private accumulation. Reforms remain limited and during

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22 Earth Works, No Dirty Gold. Accessed: [nodirtygold.org](http://nodirtygold.org)

23 Friedman-Rudovsky, J. 2011. Walmart greenwashing: Workers pay the price. *Miami New Times*. Jan. 6, 2011.

24 Bellamy Foster, J. A planetary defeat: The failure of global environmental reform. *Monthly Review*. 54(8). January 2003.

25 Smith, M. 2000. The National Question, Political Economy and the Canadian Working Class: Marxism or Nationalist Reformism. *Labour/LeTravail*. Fall 2000.

26 Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, 2002. Tunnel Vision: Women, Mining and Communities. Victoria, Australia: Oxfam Community Aid Abroad. eds. Ingrid MacDonald and Claire Rowland.

27 Clarke, J. 2003. Social Resistance and the Disturbing of the Peace. *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*. 41, 491-503.

economic crises are rolled back in the name of austerity. While working on reforms that better the lives of workers, the ends must never be abandoned: production under workers' control and the establishment of a global planned economy that wipes out all social inequalities, frees workers and meets the needs of every human. Domitila Barrios de Chungara, a Bolivian miner and author, argued in 1978, "My people are not struggling for a small victory, for a small wage increase, a small answer there. No. My people are preparing themselves to get capitalism out of their country forever, and its domestic and foreign servants, too. My people are struggling to reach socialism."<sup>28</sup>

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28 Barrios de Chungara, D. 1978. *Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, A Woman of the Bolivian Mines*. Monthly Review Press. 230.