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"FREE TRADE & RESISTANCE IN GUATEMALA"

by Cyril Mychalejko, Upside Down World. Posted May 2, 2005,
www.alternet.org/story/21913

PEACEFUL PROTEST & EDUCATION WORK

Glamis Gold Ltd. (a Canadian and US mining company) – reported on extensively in this article -- is holding its "annual and extraordinary

general meeting at 1:30pm, at The Fairmont Royal York Hotel, 100 Front Street West, Toronto".

With other organizations and individuals, Rights Action will peacefully gather at the Royal York Hotel (100 Front Street West, Toronto), Thursday, May 5, 1pm – 2pm, to protest Glamis Gold's mining operations in Guatemala and Honduras, and to provide educational materials to the media, and Glamis Gold Shareholders and Directors.

If you want on-off this elist: info@rightsaction.org

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FREE TRADE & RESISTANCE IN GUATEMALA

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On January 11, 2005, Guatemalan President Oscar Berger spoke to a group of reporters in Guatemala City about ongoing protests against a World Bank mining project in the northern part of the country. He said that his government had to establish law and order. "We have to protect investors," said Berger.

Hours later the Guatemalan military and police forces armed in riot gear opened fire on protesters, murdering one man and leaving dozens injured.

Berger's comments about establishing law and order in Guatemala to protect investors and the ensuing violence and state repression that followed that day and in the following months are not isolated incidents indicative

of
that country's democratic shortcomings. Rather they illustrates the
violent
forces employed to secure the expansion of capitalist globalization
being
forced on people through neoliberal reforms and free trade agreements
pushed
by transnational corporations, Northern governments, and international
lending agencies.

ALL THAT GLITTERS ISN'T GOLD

Glamis Gold, a mining company incorporated in Canada with headquarters
in
Reno, Nevada, was given a \$45 million loan from the World Bank to
construct
and operate a gold and silver mine in San Marcos, Guatemala, 90 air
miles
from Guatemala City in the country's western highlands. Two of the
towns
directly affected by the project are San Miguel Ixtahuacan, and
Sipacapa,
whose populations are 98 percent and 77 percent indigenous.

The Guatemalan government ratified International Labor Organization
Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, which ensures (at
least on
paper) indigenous people's land rights and rights to self-
determination.
Articles in the Convention state that indigenous communities must be
consulted and allowed to participate in decision-making processes in
any
matters concerning their land and lives.

The World Bank has similar procedural "safeguards" to ensure only
projects
with "broad community support" are approved.

Unfortunately, the ambiguous language coupled with lack of independent
oversight and enforcement mechanisms allows transnational corporations
like
Glamis and global institutions like the World Bank to set their own
standards.

According to Sandra Cuffe of Rights Action, a human rights and
community
development organization, local community members said people were
asked to
sign their names to receive lunch at Glamis presentations. They now
suspect

Glamis used the lunch lists to claim they 'consulted' people.

Cuffe works in Honduras, has traveled to Guatemala and has monitored Glamis' mining operations in both countries. She is the author of a report on mining and neoliberal reforms in the two countries titled, "A backwards, upside-down kind of development: Global actors, mining and community-based resistance in Honduras and Guatemala."

Graham Saul, International Program Coordinator for Friends of the Earth Canada, has been monitoring the project and agrees the "consultation" process is largely a charade. "Consultation is more of a public relations exercise than a meaningful legal process. It gives companies like Glamis and the World Bank cover [where they can say]: 'Yes we consulted and yes there is popular support,'" said Saul.

Needless to say, both institutions claim the project has broad support. But an article in the Guatemalan newspaper Prensa Libre contradicts their claims. The article cites a survey conducted by the Vox Latina Institute in which 95 percent of people living in San Miguel Ixtahuacan and Sipacapa who were surveyed oppose the mining project. A majority of people believe that mining would harm the environment and not benefit their communities.

These people are right. The local communities sustain themselves largely through farming and raising livestock. As a result of the project, which is in its construction phase, many of the people have been evicted and relocated from land they have lived on for generations. "They don't have any say on whether they want to be moved, where they are moved to and what kind of housing they will receive," said Cuffe.

There have also been reports that one community which was relocated went weeks without access to drinking water. "The rights of indigenous peoples in Guatemala have been trampled on for hundreds of years. Now they are being told their land has been parceled out to foreign mining companies,

most of them Canadian. This is a recipe for disaster – both human and environmental," said Saul.

But the human rights violations just begin there. The mining project will bring long-term social and environmental destruction. The open-pit mining operations will consume vast amounts of water, which could make water used for irrigation of farmland scarce. Glamis is not required to pay for the use of water.

Any water that is left available for local communities to use for farming and livestock and the immediate ecosystem can also be expected to be contaminated by cyanide, which is used for the extraction of gold, and other harmful chemicals and debris associated with open-pit mining. Alcohol, prostitution, sexual assault and rape also are often commonplace in mining camps in Latin America.

Now, Glamis and the World Bank will counter that the project will bring employment for many locals, but most of these jobs will be terminated after the construction phase. In addition, Glamis is also building infrastructure that includes roads, new homes, schools, and medical clinics. Guatemala will also receive up to 3 percent in royalties.

Jamie Kneen, communications and outreach coordinator of the Canadian NGO Miningwatch., calls this window dressing. "If you're destroying productive farm land, dislocating people and destroying water supplies you're going to need more than a school to compensate," said Kneen. He added that in ten years time the mine is expected to be closed and Glamis is not obligated to fund the maintenance and operating costs for the infrastructure projects that the company touts as benefits. Whatever paltry royalties the Guatemalan government will gain from the project can be expected to be tied up

repairing "unforeseen" environmental damages. He said that the so called benefits Glamis are offering is nothing more than an exercise in public relations.

"It's a lot easier to buy PR. When you add it up it amounts to very little money," said Kneen, "nothing compared to the value of the resources extracted or reasonable royalties."

"BREAD TODAY, HUNGER TOMORROW"

On December 3, 2004, more than 2000 indigenous farmers and villagers gathered to block a convoy traveling on the Pan-American Highway carrying mining equipment from reaching the Marlin site.

This organized opposition resulted from what many local people perceived as lack of consultation and access to decision making along with the widespread belief that the project would destroy their environment and way of life.

Though the numbers dwindled, the blockade lasted 40 days until Jan 11, when Guatemala's Interior Ministry deployed the military and security forces to "protect investors."

The security forces used tear gas and fired their AK-47's into the crowd. Raul Castro Bocel, a 37 year-old campesino from Solola, was killed. The company issued a press release stating, "Glamis is saddened that this criminal activity may have resulted in injury and loss of life." Unfortunately, Glamis wasn't referring to the criminal activity of the Guatemalan military and police forces, who, when they fired into the demonstration, violated provisions of that country's 1996 Peace Accord which ended Guatemala's 36 year civil war. Provisions in the Peace Accord were established to set up safeguards to ensure that state-sponsored violence that had resulted in a genocidal campaign against the country's indigenous peoples populating most of the rural areas.

Glamis blamed the confrontation on "anti-development activists" and

their
"misinformation" rousing the local population. Its press release went
onto
reconfirm that "the project continues to be strongly supported by
local
residents."

The World Bank also posted a statement on its website in response to
the
murder and state repression. It stated that the Bank was "in frequent
contact with the company and the government as concerted efforts were
being
made to find a peaceful resolution."

Conspicuously missing was any mention of the World Bank having any
dialogue
with the local protesters. Then again, why would it change its
practices at
this point in the project?

The Catholic Church in Guatemala has also been an outspoken critic of
the
mining project and has been heavily involved with the organized
resistance
to it. And it is also not immune from the violence. The Guatemalan
Human
Rights Commission announced that a former intelligence officer
reported
being offered \$50,000 by an anonymous woman to assassinate San Marcos
Bishop
Alvaro Ramazzini. Berger responded by putting the bishop under
government
protection. Ramazzini has been a vocal supporter of campesinos'
organizing
efforts against mining.

Despite the atmosphere of intimidation, local opposition to the mining
project has not only sustained itself but continues to grow. Reuters
reported ("All's not gold to Guatemala's Mayans", 02/28/05) thousands
of
Mayan Indians gathered for an anti-mine march organized by the
Catholic
Church shouting, "Bread today, hunger tomorrow!" to express their
belief
about the benefits of the mining project.

"We don't want gold; what we want is to defend our way of life and our
water," peasant farmer Timoteo Tujil told the Reuters.

And it's not just the way of life that needs to be defended. On March

13

Alvaro Benigno Sanchez, the 23-year-old son of an outspoken critic of the Marlin project was shot and killed by an off duty security guard working for a local company hired by Glamis.

PROTECTING FREE TRADE

Bilateral and regional free trade agreements are another mechanism used by transnational corporations and northern governments to open new markets and protect the investors who pillage them.

Coincidentally, Glamis is no stranger to free trade. Glamis is suing the U.S. government for \$50 million in lost profits under investor rights provisions contained in Chapter 11 of the North American Free Trade Agreement due to the decisions of the federal government and the state of California to halt the company's open pit mining project which lies on sacred Native American sites in the southern part of the state.

This has interesting implications for Glamis' project in Guatemala. The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which is essentially an extension of NAFTA, contains similar investor rights provisions. This raises the question as to whether Glamis could use the same arbitration process, which includes no public access or oversight, should the growing resistance to the Marlin mine succeed in ending the project.

Thousands of protesters, including indigenous farmers, trade unionists and students, converged on the country's capital in early March when CAFTA was set to be voted on by lawmakers. The vote on the free trade deal, which has little public support outside of government officials and wealthy landowners, had to be postponed a day due to the ongoing demonstrations. Protesters were demanding a national referendum to let the people decide what is best for them and their country.

President Berger, never shy to "protect investors," sent in troops to quell

the protests. What ensued was the murder of two more countrymen and more violence. In addition, Amnesty International reported that two journalists were threatened with death if they continued covering the anti-CAFTA demonstrations.

Congress voted overwhelmingly in favor of CAFTA and Berger ratified the agreement on March 15.

Bishop Ramazzini issued a statement articulating why the demonstrators were opposed to the free trade agreement at a press conference during the protests. "CAFTA was negotiated behind people's backs, and this is the reason that people today are now protesting. It is based on the logic that favors profits over human rights and sustainability," said Ramazzini. "It's clearly intended to facilitate the accumulations of capital to complement and lock into place the neoliberal reforms carried out by the governments in the region."

CAFTA has also been ratified by the other Central American countries in the region and awaits approval by the U.S. government to finalize the deal. Despite widespread opposition to CAFTA in the United States, largely due to the debilitating effects NAFTA has had on the U.S. and economy, workers' lives (as well as strong disagreement from the sugar industry), a vote is expected in May. Some Republican lawmakers are breaking ranks with the president on this issue but the administration and free trade lobbyists representing transnational capital are cashing in favors and cutting deals as CAFTA is recognized as a stepping stone to passing the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

The global response to the violence and violations of international law in Guatemala has largely been muted. The media's coverage in Canada has

been
sparse at best. "A Canadian mining company having a devastating
impact on
foreign countries and their ecosystems is far too common to be
considered
newsworthy," said Saul of Friends of the Earth. In the U.S., with the
exception of a couple of wire stories, the media has been too busy
covering
more pressing matters, mainly the Michael Jackson case and the death
of
Terry Schiavo.

There have been no constructive responses by Northern governments.
Canadian
Ambassador to Guatemala James Lambert wrote an oped published in
Prensa
Libre extolling the virtues of mining as a tool for development by
comparing
mining projects affecting indigenous populations in Canada to
potential ones
in Guatemala. "Through sustainable development of our mining
resources,
these communities are creating the economic, cultural and social
infrastructure necessary to secure their future and the future of
their
children," wrote Lambert.

The claim that indigenous communities have benefited is dubious at
best,
while the comparison of Canada to Guatemala is completely
inappropriate due
to the gross economic, social and political disparities between those
two
countries.

The U.S. government in turn has rewarded the Guatemalan government for
its
commitment to neoliberal reforms and protecting investors by resuming
military aid to the country for the first time in 15 years with a \$3.2
million package; this in the wake of the recent murders and violence
and a
State department human rights report released in February which
criticized
Guatemala's National Civil Police to be the worst human rights
violator in
the country.

Global civil society must engage itself in solidarity work with the
people
in Guatemala as the World Bank, Glamis Gold and the Guatemalan

government
have forced them to literally fight for their lives and way of life.
We must
make it clear that the violence, repression, exploitation, racism and
environmental destruction inherent with the nature of capitalist
globalization are unacceptable.

Here in the U.S., defeating CAFTA must be a priority because of both
the
short term and long term implications in stopping this "backwards,
upside-down kind of development."

A spokesperson for transnational capital, Jorge Arrizurieta,
president of
Florida FTAA put it best when he recently said, if the campaign to
approve
CAFTA "is not successful, the FTAA is for the history books...The free
trade
movement will be stalled."

If we do our work right stopping both is within our reach.

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