

Big gold mining interests are destroying Marmato

Jorge Enrique Robledo, Bogotá, January 16, 2009

On November 13, at the time when the Mining Company of Caldas owed salaries and benefits to its workers, a number of trucks arrived at the facilities owned by the Canadian transnational Colombia Goldfields to haul off to Medellín the "calculating equipment, furniture, implements, materials and the rest". The reason? To sell them to the highest bidder to pay off --according to the company-- their labor and commercial debts. In the following days they abandoned their operations in Marmato and fired the last of 200 workers, without honoring their commitment to pay on December 10 many of these workers for services rendered.

Colombia Goldfields' decision to walk away from their operations in Marmato for an indefinite period, until whenever the owners feel like returning, also left a trail of debts among small businesses. According to the mayor, "they left, they say they're going to pay, but that's what every indebted person says. They don't have economic viability and they generated a social mess" (La Patria, October 7, 2008). The "social mess" the mayor is referring to also has to do with the fact that in the last two years the transnational has acquired and closed down 144 small gold mines (out of 250), where hundreds of jobs were lost, and has to do with the fact that they had bought and destroyed, with the resulting damage to production and work, a number of mills in which the small producers processed the material extracted from the mines.

The Canadian mining company, therefore, did considerable damage by entering and then leaving Marmato, and in neither occasion did either the Minister of Mining or the Minister of Social Protection nor the government of Caldas attempt to stop what was happening. They did even less to protect the future of Marmateños, for whom gold mining has been the primary source of income for centuries and who today have to "scrape together" a living for their families migrating to other regions or working the mines abandoned by the company, but with the considerable technical limitations inherent in the poverty of the miners called "guacheros," which forces them to mine under great risk to their personal safety.

In addition to the big losses to Marmato caused by allowing Colombia Goldfields the unprecedented license to purchase the mines in order to close them down and to buy the mills in order to destroy them, and then leaving without prior notice, the municipality was also left without the gold royalties that the small miners previously paid. And to top off its shady dealings with the transnational, the government even allowed Goldfields to convert the mining contracts they acquired back into exploration contracts, for which they did not pay royalties for two years, and time and again the government provided them with the "suspension of terms" measure, so that the company doesn't have to mine its holdings, but these cannot be returned to the nation for others to mine them either.

It shouldn't surprise anyone that the authorities act in this way, because they also did not say anything when Colombia Goldfields carried out a campaign of terror by pressuring

the Marmateños to sell their mines at a cheap price, using the pretext that the mountain was going to collapse on top of them and that the company, "with the support of the government", had the power to destroy the historical center of the town and set up an enormous open pit gold mining operation, the kind that has the worst environmental impact and whose license was never processed. And it was shameful that a number of Caldas governments used their public funds --very limited of course-- to help transfer the urban zone of Marmato to El Llano, moving the people into urban and housing conditions of extremely poor quality so that costs of the project could be reduced for the company, which has stated that "the total cost (of displacement) could be around 20 million dollars, with the possibility of sharing this cost with the (national) government".

Once again one of the truths that is most well hidden by neoliberal governments, such as the one suffered by Colombia, is confirmed: that while national interests can coincide with foreign ones, with benefits for each side, they can also be contradictory and even conflicting, and that to deny this fundamental truth, as governments in effect do, inevitably causes great damage to the country, because those who supposedly represent the nation act under the fallacious reasoning that what's good for transnational capital is good for Colombia.

