

**A Journey into the Lives of Mexican Communities  
Affected by Canadian Mining Companies  
Report on the United Steelworkers' Delegation to Mexico  
February 12-20, 2013**

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A delegation of nine of us, organized by representatives of the United Steelworkers (USW), spent nine days in Mexico to learn, first hand, the impacts some Canadian mining companies are having on communities and workers there. I was honoured to be able to represent KAIROS, as the co-convenor of the Sustainability Circle, and journey together with delegates representing the national USW, two USW locals, the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).



Members of the United Steelworkers Delegation with staff and community members at the ProDESC offices in Mexico City. Janette McIntosh is second from left in the second row.

With the capable leadership and facilitation of the staff at ProDESC (Project of Economic, Cultural, and Social Rights) in Mexico City, in the first couple of days we were introduced to the Mexican context. We met with members of REMA (Mexican Network of Mining-Affected

Communities) who shared their stories of struggles, community organizing efforts, determination, and survival. We also met with the national leadership of Los Mineros (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos, Siderúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana). We were specifically asked by the Executive Director of ProDESC, Alejandra Ancheita, **to be here as witness and stand in solidarity with community members against the collaboration of governments and companies, and bring their stories home.** It is now my responsibility to share what I have learned.

On the third day the delegation divided into two. One group visited the state of Durango where the Canadian mining company Excellon Resources operates its La Platosa silver mine, to meet with leaders and members of the Ejido of La Sierrita and Section 309 of Los Mineros. There, some workers alleged that they were terminated by Excellon Resources because they were exercising their rights to join a democratic trade union. Members also spoke with the widow of Paulin Contreras, a worker killed in a workplace accident at the Excellon mine in 2010. Workers and community members clearly denounced Excellon's breaking of agreements with the Los Mineros miners' union and the communal ejido land owners. The delegation saw and heard directly from members of the community regarding some of the impacts Canadian mining companies are having. Excellon Resources rejected the delegation's request for a meeting. For a full report on findings from this delegation, please refer to "The Accountability Gap: Highlights from the February 2013 Delegation to Examine Canadian Mining Operations in Mexico" at [www.usw.ca](http://www.usw.ca).

The group I was with visited the state of Oaxaca. As initiation in the city of Oaxaca, we first met with members of the Colectivo Oaxaqueño en Defensa de los Territorios whose membership consists of representatives from Unosjo S.C., EDUCA, Tequio Juridico A.C., Flor Y Conto A.C., SER, and Prodh, with each of the organizations bringing valuable perspectives, expertise, and experiences to further their work together in defending Indigenous territorial rights. This session was very informative for learning the background and situation in Oaxaca, the challenges facing communities, some specific background related to San Jose del Progreso, and the follow-up to the conference "Yes to Life, No to Mining" held in January in Capulalpam. **Specifically, we were asked to write letters directly to companies of concern, to inform ourselves about these issues, and continue to exchange information.** We later met with members of the Peace Brigades International who work with human rights issues and have most recently assisted three priests through accompaniment, one of whom was Father Martin Octavio Garcia Ortiz, the former Catholic priest in San José del Progreso.

**February 15<sup>th</sup>** was the day we travelled north from Oaxaca City up the winding roads into the mountainous area where Capulalpam is, a Zapoteco community rich with history and traditions.

With colourful flags up in the centre square, many workers were busy sweeping the grounds and repairing buildings. We were greeted by the members of the Executive Council who were all older men, the community elders. We had meaningful exchanges. We learned about their community history with gold mining, the environmental effects they have had to live through, their governing structure and their coherent collective stance against Continuum Resources' attempts at starting up an open-pit gold mine two kilometres away. There are approximately 1,700 residents today. This town knows what mining is all about. There used to be three mining operations in this area owned by the mining company Grupo Mexico. In 1998 the company declared bankruptcy and fired all of the workers, members of Los Mineros (the national union of mine workers). Workers were poorly compensated and some were left ill, with no other job opportunities. Because many of the young people had left school to work in the mine their lack of education, combined with deteriorated lands, made community development difficult. Since 2006, Continuum Resources, a Canadian based company, has been exploring to exploit gold and silver in the area by drilling tunnels under their forested areas and aquifers. We were told that 13 wells are dried up or polluted now with only one left for the community. In 2007, Profepa, the Mexican federal environmental regulator, ordered a temporary and partial closure of the mine because of the serious environmental degradation, and with strong community pressure Continuum Resources was unable to continue operation of the mine.



Delegation members hear how what used to be marsh land in Capulapam is now dried up. Although now parkland for community, the loss of this land is not forgotten.



In Capulalpam, members of the community are doing the best they can to preserve the one remaining water source, create alternative solutions to economic development, and find ways to attract young professionals to return or stay to live and work in their community for future prosperity and sustainability. The company's "solution" to water depletion was to truck in water, which, in the community's opinion, is absurd and unsustainable. One of the elders stated: **"I would rather hold a glass of water in my hand than a gold or silver necklace"** – his expressed image I continue to hold in my heart. The communal decision making process, the level of cohesion, their pride and joy in their place, as community, were inspiring for us all. February 22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> marked their five year anniversary celebrations for earning the "Magical Community" designation of the government by preserving their heritage buildings and environment by creating an eco-tourism park. It was a beautiful day in the company of truly beautiful people.

On **February 16<sup>th</sup>**, we travelled about 45 minutes south of Oaxaca City to the community of San José del Progreso with approximately 1,500 residents. The Vancouver-based company Fortuna Silver Mines Inc. is already in operation, mining and processing both silver and gold. Land concessions were granted by the federal government and purchase of ejido lands from individual community residents for mining access was made possible. This community is clearly divided between the mine opponents, the Coordination of the United Towns of the Ocotlán Valley (CPUVO), and the supporters of the mine, San José Defendiendo Nuestros Derechos (San Jose Defending our Rights). The community even has two competing taxi services in red and blue for the residents taking different positions.



Mural in San José del Progreso : "Yes to life, No to the Mine."

The escalated tensions and violence have led to kidnapping and violence against a local priest who spoke out against the mine, and two murders in 2012. Despite our request to meet with company representatives and the Municipal representative who is clearly in favour of the mine, neither replied nor met with us. As Canadians, we were saddened and angered to see and hear directly how a Canadian company's presence and practices are contributing to this community divide and escalating violence as well as the erosion of the land and contamination of water. There seems to be no respect for human rights or for the rights of indigenous peoples to free, prior informed consent regarding any projects which may affect their territories.



Dolores Gonzalez, whose spouse and nephew were murdered, now worries for her daughter Roaslinda's safety when her 'protector' goes off duty.

Struck by the contrast from the previous day, but also by the quiet determination seen in the people we met, I remain grateful for the generous hospitality of the leaders and their families who continue to fight in opposition to the mine despite injuries and life threats received. I am humbled by their grace, dedication, and perseverance. Reminded of some potentially dangerous and destructive ways in which business is being conducted in the name of "development" we return with stories to share, heavy-hearted but with a new commitment to take action.

**Sunday, February 17<sup>th</sup>** was a very memorable day for me. After attending early mass at a nearby church (There is no shortage of churches in Oaxaca City!) we had the opportunity to meet with Padre Martin Octavio Garcia Ortiz, one of the three priests Peace Brigades International had accompanied recently. Father Martin served as a priest in San José del Progreso from early 2007 to June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010 when he was kidnapped, severely beaten and detained for several days, allegedly by a company-funded group in the community called “San José, Defending our Rights.” Arrested by police and detained without medical attention, he was taken to hospital three days later and after two weeks released without charges. There has been no investigation of this case and no one has been charged for the assault or confinement. Padre Martin is a brave and faithful man, deeply committed to community, concerned and knowledgeable about the environment, who took the initiative to organize educational forums on the impacts of mining on the land, the water, and health of the community residents. He truly believed in open process and the power of informed consent. He is a leader with great faith, conviction, and commitment to justice and did not submit to the offerings of the company to support church programs in exchange for his support for mining operations. The Canadian Embassy also met with Padre Martin to try to convince him of the benefits of the mine to the community. The community never had the proper consultation which is all that they had wanted. Padre Martin loved his people and desired the flourishing of his community but, instead, he was subjected to harsh treatment and abuse. Sad and broken, but strong with faith and courage, this man of faith was a source of inspiration for me personally - a role model for us all in how we live out our faith in community, for each and everyone’s flourishing, with hope, love and commitment, and never giving up!



Padre Martin Octavio Garcia Ortiz

This is but one story of one man's life. I wonder how many other church leaders are in Mexico risking their lives knowing God's love and believing with hope for the flourishing of their communities. I wonder where the diocese is and what its position is. How supportive might they be of Padre Martin's actions? What support and assistance might be given to other church leaders who are brave enough to call for community consultation and/or are brave enough to speak out against mining, hydro dams, or windmills affecting their communities? I wonder and pray...

On Monday morning, February 18<sup>th</sup>, both groups of the delegation held press conferences at each of their locales, in Durango and in Oaxaca City. The Colectivo in Oaxaca organized for the local media representatives and members of the colectivo to come and hear our delegations' report and findings. Focused mostly on ejido land rights, mining practices and environmental concerns, and indigenous people's rights to free, prior and informed consent, we were able to jointly voice our concerns and share some actions to carry forward in our Canadian context. Media clips were effectively released in two states in Mexico covering similar stories and concerns focusing on Canadian mining practices, the violations of labour and human rights, and environmental degradation.

Back in Mexico City, our final meeting was at the Canadian Embassy. "What company are you with?" was the first question our organizer was asked at the gate upon arrival. Perhaps this is a clear indication of what level and type of inquiries they receive. The one hour plus meeting at the embassy was certainly interesting, and a helpful wrap up for us all. We met with officials from Trade, Economic Affairs, and Political Affairs. They were well aware of the situations in the communities we visited and had even received contact from Excellon Resources who stated to them that the company had not spoken with our Durango delegation (i.e., declaring bias?). One delegate remarked how "appalling" it was to see how Excellon Resources treats its workers, and that "if in Canada a company treats its workers like that there'd be serious consequences." There are now many lingering questions for us around the effectiveness of the Corporate Social Responsibility Council, its ways of monitoring companies, the voluntary sign up, and level of transparency in operations and reporting, which all affect Canadian investments. Perhaps a gift of time and place, and a reminder to us all... In our walk back, we witnessed a kilometer long trail of demonstrating workers and vendors marching for freedom – of expression, of prisoners, for dignity and rights.

Our final meeting was with ProDESC staff at their office. We each shared our thoughts with heart and emotion about what we saw and heard on this trip. Without ProDESC's team we would not have been able to come and witness together what we have. The nine days were full, and we feel better equipped to share what is happening in Mexico from what we've seen and



heard first hand. This has been an incredible journey for us all – very humbling, at times discouraging, sometimes anger and shame-provoking, yet with hope and inspiration found in surprising encounters. **We don't understand and have to ask why companies don't follow through with the agreements made with Mexican people, community members and workers. This is not OK.** Clearly, human rights and labour rights are being violated. We are compelled to be and act in solidarity with people and communities. We must share these stories of lies and deceit. We have a responsibility to act, possibly as shareholders in these companies through our pension funds. We ask: how can we be a part of this struggle? **Convinced of the value of international solidarity, we were reminded of the person on the other side when signing agreements, submitting letters/notices/statements etc.** This is real solidarity. Thanked for the great hearts we brought with us and our willingness to move forward, **we were reminded also that the people only want respect for their lives and land.** The Mexican people are not products nor things; they are people too, who value and hope for their ability to flourish in life just like we do!

The founder of ProDESC, Alejandra Ancheita, is a brave, wise, and determined woman with great dedication and legal expertise who has a wonderfully supportive and capable team of lawyers, organizers, and communicators. As she said, **they are building a hope process in a very broken, failed, corrupt system by believing and suggesting that another world is possible. In solidarity, with empathy, we are now participants in building this hope process together.**



Alejandra Ancheita



KAIROS is a part of this evolving story. Five or six of the delegates will be coming together in Vancouver for the USW national policy conference in mid-April. Alejandra Ancheita from ProDESC will be presenting the Durango case on a panel with Emily Dwyer, coordinator of Canadian Network for Corporate Accountability (CNCA) on April 18th. There, the report: “The Accountability Gap: Highlights from the February 2013 Delegation to Examine Canadian Mining Operations in Mexico” will be presented by USW along with the video: “The Accountability Gap,” both available through the USW website [www.usw.ca](http://www.usw.ca). KAIROS Vancouver is co-sponsoring a public event with Amnesty International and Lawyers’ Rights Watch Canada on April 17<sup>th</sup> from 7-9p.m. at the Vancouver Central Library at which time Alejandra and Emily will speak as our guests to share their stories, concerns, and recommended actions.

### **Post Script**

Located in Vancouver, I happen to live in a city which is home to close to 1000 mining companies owned or registered as “Canadian” for the perks and protections our federal and provincial governments offer. Toronto, with the Toronto Stock Exchange, is THE leading ‘hub’ for mining companies in Canada. Our country is host to seventy-five percent of the world’s mining companies. From what I heard and saw in Mexico, I have more questions than answers now around issues of corporate social responsibility, environmental stewardship, democratic process and community development – something I think we pride ourselves in being “Canadian,” but not necessarily reflected in the Canadian corporate practices of mining overseas. Our country has a long history with mining, and I realize there are many sides to this story within the complexities of our economic, corporate, and governmental systems. However, I have sought to listen and observe, and although still searching for answers, am glad to be able to begin to share.

Since my return to Vancouver, I have been exposed to more mining-related events. On March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women’s Day, I attended the “Evening in Solidarity with the Women of Guatemala Resisting Canadian Mining” and heard from Emilie Smith about her experiences and visits with the women and the communities affected there. Then, on March 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>, I had the opportunity to be a part of hosting Vidalina Morales from La Mesa, El Salvador, one of two speakers on the 2013 “Mining is More Precious than Gold” cross-Canada speaking tour. Between the small events and bigger events jointly hosted by the Council of Canadians and Vancouver’s Mining Justice Alliance we not only heard from Vidalina but also from Lolita Castro, an Indigenous person fighting against Canadian mining companies for her people, their land, and especially water. Accompanying Vidalina to Victoria was enriching for me personally, but also very stimulating, as I was able to join her for a meeting with one of the local MPs. The dialogue gave me new insights and perspectives on how mining companies are able to do what

they do – ignore Canadian laws overseas, piggy-back onto whatever country’s legislation which would conveniently put the company at an advantage to maximize profit at whatever cost - even if it means the El Salvador government has had to spend five million dollars for legal fees against a fraudulent claim! Alain Denault and William Sacher, in their book *Imperial Canada Inc.*, call upon us to get informed about and engaged on this issue of mining, mainly by critically examining our own investments. As we speak of “ethical” and “socially responsible” investments, I cannot agree more. But don’t be fooled!! To follow these criteria and complying (or not) is *their* choice. It is strictly voluntary for the companies! There is an accountability gap that needs to be addressed, and no longer can I sit, watch, and be complacent. This affects us in so many ways, but all of us together are “profiteering” through our pension funds, including CPP. If companies are not obviously listed by name, they are hidden in bank and insurance investments. Is it so difficult to set a standard of expectations which are ethical, socially responsible, and just, that we can all live with (including the people affected in the south), which can also satisfy the legal requirement for trustees to “ensure maximum return”? I think we need to re-think this formula and framework which benefits only the already wealthy few. Where is the church, and what is our role in all of this? I hope and pray we can live by the standards we set as Christians and can truly reflect our teachings in all that we do by practising what we preach. This would mean turning our world of economics upside down. Such calls have been made to churches already. *The Accra Confession*, for example, was a bold step forward calling for changes in our neo-liberal economic system. Jesus flipped the tables in the temple grounds. What are we as Canadians, but also KAIROS, prepared to do now?

#### **Media Clips of the Delegation:**

- <http://www.adnsureste.info/index.php/noticias/notas-del-dia/52163-rrr>
- <http://www.noticiasnet.mx/portal/oaxaca/general/138163-intenta-canadienses-legislar-mineras-informe>
- <http://newsoaxaca.com/index.php/general/11880-activistas-se-pronuncian-en-contra-de-minerias-canadienses>
- <http://www.elsiglodetorreon.com.mx/noticia/841504.sindicatos-canadienses-documentan-conflicto-entre-excellon-y-la-sierrita.html>
- <http://www.elsiglodedurango.com.mx/noticia/425544.informaran-de-presuntas-violaciones-a-derecho.html>
- <http://adiariooaxaca.com/index.php/oaxaca/general/18987-mineras-hacen-lo-que-quieren-en-oaxaca>
- <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2013/02/19/estados/033n1est>