



NO NOS MATEN
FUERA BARRICK

“WATER IS WORTH MORE THAN GOLD”

CASE 1

BARRICK GOLD IN ARGENTINA: POLITICS, CONTAMINATION AND RESISTANCE

The Divest in Mining Campaign is promoted by the Churches and Mining Network. Divestment is a concrete tool to confront an extractivist economic model that generates devastation and inequality. The Campaign accompanies religious organizations in their commitment to fair finance and provides advice, technical tools and concrete alternatives to achieve a transformation within the Churches. It also seeks to influence and make visible the violations of rights and environmental impacts generated by mining and to make the life and demands of people and nature heard.

From the Divest in Mining Campaign, we are documenting 10 cases of mining in Latin America, its impacts and resistance.



BARRICK GOLD IN ARGENTINA: POLITICS, CONTAMINATION AND RESISTANCE

The Canadian multinational has been operating in Argentina since 2003, when it began construction of its Veladero mine in the province of San Juan. Promises of jobs and local development. Protagonist of the largest mining spill in local history, alliance with governors and presidents, media and judicial impunity. And a people that does not stop fighting.





By Darío Aranda

Darío Aranda (1977) is a journalist. Specialized in extractivism, he writes about indigenous peoples, peasants and socio-environmental issues.

He collaborates with media in Argentina (Página 12, the cooperative La Vaca and FM La Tribu) and international media.

He is the author of the books “Argentina Originaria. Genocidios, saqueos y resistencias”. And of “Tierra Arrasada. Petróleo, soya, pasteras y megaminería”.

Night falls in Jáchal. Ana Ruiz bathes her baby Ignacio and prepares him to sleep. That familiar and loving event is altered minutes later, when she learns about the cyanide spill of the mining company Barrick Gold in the river. Dozens of images flash through Ana’s mind, from the times they denounced that this contamination could happen, to the governors’ speeches with promises of work, health and environmental care. But she is left with a recent, daily act that now causes her fear and even guilt: What if she bathed her baby in contaminated water? What to do? Who to ask? She feels panic, anguish and abandonment.

A sample of what it means to live with mega-mi-

ning: unfulfilled promises, contamination, fear, violated rights and an absent democracy.

Business discourse

Jobs, local development, care for the environment. These were three of the main promises made by Barrick Gold and the government of San Juan to exploit gold and copper at its Veladero deposit.

Barrick still to this day advertises its Veladero deposit as its “main activity” in Argentina. Built during 2003 and 2004, it began its exploitation phase in 2005. Located in the Andes Mountains, northwest of the province of San Juan. The company reports an investment of US\$540 million.



In partnership since 2007 with China’s Shandong Gold, in 2020 Barrick announced the extension of “at least ten years” for the life of the mine. According to corporate advertising, “since 2005 Veladero has contributed some 9.5 billion dollars to the Argentine economy through taxes, royalties, salaries and payments to local suppliers”. And it claims to employ more than 3,300 people.

Domingo Jofré, from the Jáchal No Se Toca As-

sembly, responds: “It is a big lie”. He recalls that there is not a single official study or report that shows the supposed positive impact of mega-mining.

Barrick also advertises its Achilles’ heel: “At Veladero we understand that our work is directly related to the environment, and that is why we use the safest and most technologically advanced methods. We work respecting environmental standards. And we carry out internal and external controls, both with the participation of the community and specialized companies”.

For a decade its slogan in Argentina was “responsible mining”. Now it uses “mining for a brighter future”.

The largest spill in history

There was no official information. The alert came via WhatsApp message, from the mine workers themselves who were in the deposit and alerted their families in Jáchal and nearby towns not to drink the water coming down the river. At 9:00 p.m., numerous WhatsApp chains were



already circulating and being replicated among the neighbors. At midnight the population gathered in the main square, demanding official information that did not arrive.

“The Mayor said he did not know. And Barrick and the provincial government covered up for each other,” recalls Saúl Zeballos, from the Jáchal No Se Toca Assembly.

“Nothing was ever the same again. Our whole daily life was disrupted. It marked us with anguish that we will never forget, with a lump in our throat and tears that we will always remember. We are still buying bottled water, with permanent fears and distorted information by those responsible”, stated the Assembly’s communiqué that recalled the first year of the spill.

The National University of Cuyo, through the Instrumental Analysis Laboratory of the School of Engineering, confirmed that the meltwater rivers were contaminated with dangerous heavy metals. It also confirmed high values (contamination) of manganese, aluminum, arsenic, boron, chlorides and sulfates.

The Secretary of Environment of the Nation inspec-



ted the area after the spill. It confirmed that there was an environmental impact, and denounced failures in the environmental management system and the precariousness of the channel through which the polluting liquid circulates. “The Secretary’s analysis of the Potrerillos River showed 555 milligrams per liter of solution. In the report they crossed it out by hand and left 55 milligrams, which is still a lot,” said Zeballos. And he recalled that it was not “just a valve, as Barrick’s spokespersons said, a retaining wall that was supposed to stop the cyanide solution also gave way, which shows the magnitude of the spill”.

The Environmental Crimes Operations Division of the Federal Police issued a report and determined the contamination of five rivers: “We are facing a clear violation of Law 24.051 (on Hazardous Waste), as the contamination of the Jáchal, Blanco, Potrerillos, Palca and Las Taguas rivers has been proven”.

The file of the Hazardous Waste Directorate of the Secretariat of Environment confirmed that there were at least three other previous spills at the Veladero mine: July 31 and November 29, 2011, and March 22, 2012. None of the spills were reported to the community and in all cases the company minimized the contamination.

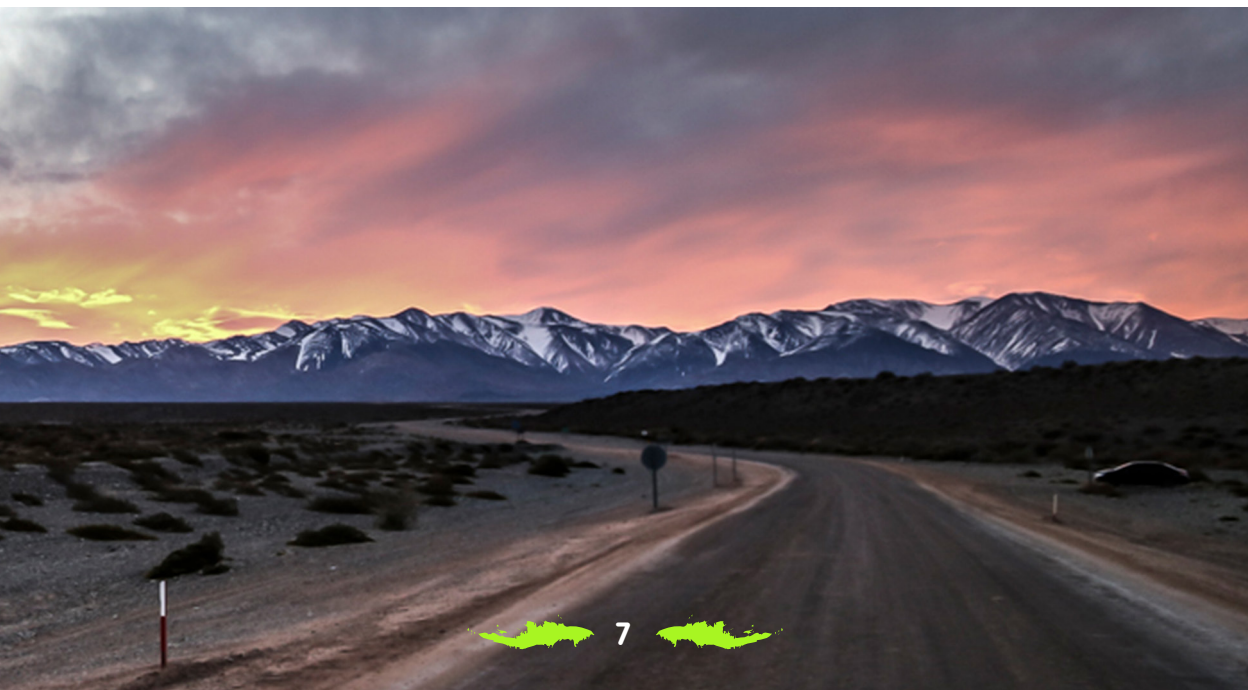
Resistances

2.400 days. Which is equal to six years and seven months. That is how long the “resistance tent” has been standing in the main square of Jáchal, a city of 24,000 inhabitants and the heart of the struggle against Barrick Gold. They define it as “the only means of expression” in the face of the silence of the big media in the province.



It is the epicenter of talks, debates, meetings. Even in times of pandemic, the tent is still standing. On one of its sides are displayed a dozen faces responsible for the mega-mining in San Juan, the presidents (from Carlos Menem to Alberto Fernandez, through Nestor Kirchner and Mauricio Macri). Governors José Luis Gioja and Sergio Uñac, and Judge Pablo Oritja are also included.

In 2018 they starred in a historic event. Faced with the national government’s onslaught to modify the Glaciers Law (which acts as a legal brake on the advance of extractive activities), from the Assembly of Jáchal they decided an unprecedented action of visibilization: a “bicicleada” of



1,400 kilometers to Buenos Aires, with daily stops to denounce the extractive lobby and the complicity of the political leadership. “The final battle in defense of water is coming. The Glaciers Law will not be touched”, warned the first press release, which announced the departure from San Juan on February 19 and the arrival in Buenos Aires on February 27.

“We will travel 1,400 kilometers in defense of the Glacier Law, in defense of life. The same distance that the water from the glaciers of the Andes Mountains travels to the Atlantic Sea, nourishing and giving life and production as it passes through the whole country”, they explained.

They recalled that the law had been “constantly beaten and obstructed”, without full and effective application. “Had it been applied, the three cyanide spills from the Veladero mine that contaminated five rivers would not have occurred, as it should have been closed for being within the periglacial environment,” they denounced in 2018 and they maintain it today.

At the time of the bike ride, which was received in ten towns with also polluting extractive problems (in addition to mining, agribusiness, with its pesticides and deforestation), the government of Mauricio Macri had made public that it was seeking to modify the current regulations in order to move forward with at least 40 projects that could collide with the protection of glaciers.

Among the main slogans was one that stands out as a banner of struggle in Argentina: “Water is worth more than gold”. The tour was followed by cooperative and community media (in the face of the silence of the mainstream media). At each stop there were talks about the polluting issues, music and celebration. On February 27th they reached the National Congress.

In a moving speech, Domingo Jofré reaffirmed: “As they say in Jáchal and send us to say, the glaciers belong to everyone, they are not to be touched. Jáchal lives, Jáchal sings, Jáchal walks, puts

the body and assumes the fight”.

In the more than eight years of its existence, the Jáchal Assembly has carried out dozens of resistance, visibility and awareness activities. Among the latest, and perhaps the most novel, was the recent climb to the Andes Mountains to see with their own eyes where the water that feeds the region comes from. A dozen people prepared themselves and climbed more than 4,000 meters above sea level (first by car, then on a long hike) to reach one of the places where ice is transformed into water.

It was on March 22, World Water Day, and the climb had two objectives: to raise awareness of the importance of glaciers as givers of life and to pay tribute to “the fighters, the water madmen” who dedicate their lives to protecting and defending it”.

Democracies

The city of Esquel (Chubut) was the first in Argentina to vote on mining. The Canadian multinational Meridian Gold sought to exploit gold and silver. In a context of Argentina’s enormous economic crisis, the population organized and voted. Eighty-two percent said “no” to mega-mining. The triumph illuminated struggles in the country’s 5,000 kilometers of Cordillera.



In 2012 it was the turn of Loncopué (Neuquén), where history repeated itself. A company (in this case from China), together with the provincial government, tried to settle in the area. Quick organization, confluence of urban and rural sectors, teachers, students, native peoples and the birth of an assembly. Organization, plebiscite and vote. Again, as in Esquel, more than 80 percent said no to mega-mining.

In Jáchal they were on the verge of voting in May 2016. The Assembly promoted a popular consul-



tation for the population to decide on megamining, but the Deliberating Council did not authorize the vote (it was not approved by the councilors for the officialism, same party as the Governor). The same officials who came through the vote, denied that possibility to the population.

A concept coined by the Union of Community Assemblies (UAC, which brings together dozens of assemblies) became palpable: “The more extractivism, the less democracy”.

Complicit silence

Since the Barrick Gold spill in San Juan, the news portal Infobae (the most widely read in Argentina) has been the one that has consistently reported every piece of news about the mining company. But there was a drastic change in mid-2017. The Canadian company started an advertising campaign with the unique form of “news” about the mining actions. Some

titles: “The work of a woman miner at 4,850 meters of altitude”, “The geologist–runner who trains at 5,000 meters of altitude and crossed The Andes running”, “The amazing story of a woman who drives giant mining trucks”. Half a dozen “notes”. With a brief and confusing notice of “non-editorial space”, euphemism for advertising.

Infobae did not publish again news critical of mining. Neither did the mainstream media.

Justice is absent

After the Barrick Gold spill in Veladero, the Argentine Association of Environmental Lawyers denounced the actions of the company (the Assembly was accepted as a plaintiff in March 2016, after having presented 3000 signatures of citizens from Jachalleros).

The case was heard in Federal Criminal and Correctional Court 7, under the jurisdiction of Jud-

ge Sebastián Casanello. The then Secretary of Environment of the Nation, Sergio Lorusso; the Undersecretary of Environmental Control and Inspection, Beatriz Domingorena; and the Secretary of Mining of the Nation, Jorge Mayoral, were prosecuted for “non-compliance with the duties of a public official”. In an unprecedented case, it was elevated to oral trial in October 2018, but it has not yet taken place.

“Throughout the investigation, the judge corroborated a series of omissions on the part of the officials, which allowed undue spaces of discretion in the activity developed by the company in the Veladero mine; activity that due to its enormous risk should have

been subject to a deep and thorough control”, explained Saúl Zeballos, from the Jáchal Assembly.



The Judge established that the absence of control and the deficit in state performance was related to the spill of more than one million liters of cyanide solution caused at the Veladero mine in September 2015.

In a parallel case, the judge also indicted three Secretaries of Environment of the Nation (Juan José Mussi, Omar Judis and Sergio Lorusso) for violating the Glaciers Law (26,639). They are accused of non-compliance with the duties of a public official. The scientist Ricardo Villalba, from Ianigla (Argentine Institute of Nivology, Glaciology and Environmental Sciences), is also being prosecuted for the crime of abuse of authority.

The two federal cases are awaiting oral trial before Federal Judge María Romilda Servini.

For the second mercury and cyanide spill at the Veladero mine (September 2016) and the third pollution event (March 2017) there were new complaints. Both fell on Judge Oritja, he also denied the Assembly’s complaint.

“The Supreme Court paved the way for the Cana-

dian Barrick Gold. The same Court that has had for 13 years a case for the environmental damages of the Pascua Lama mining project (also belonging to Barrick Gold and Shandong).

Churches

On June 25, 2009, on the 254th anniversary of the city of Jáchal, there was a great public event, with the visit of the governor, José Luis Gioja, ministers, businessmen and the media of the capital city of San Juan. A large attendance and speeches from a select box. The memory of the pioneers, the works carried out and announcements, promises of a better future. Until it was time for the priest Orlando Ruggieri, from the same stage and looking Governor Gioja in the eyes.

He welcomed him and thanked him for everything he had done for San Juan, but it was only the preamble to make explicit in public what nobody dared to tell the Governor: “I have to say it, there is concern about mining. History will tell the positive or negative of mining exploitation. The future will tell, but you have to understand us, if I am making this concern known to you it is because we are worried about it”.

The box with officials suddenly mutated. Smiles were left behind. Governor Gioja, the most powerful man in the province, did not look at the parish priest. Grim gestures dominated the scene. The discomfort could be felt in the bodies.

Priest Ruggieri continued with his kind but firm tone: “There is concern about the negative consequences that mining may have in this area. I express the feelings and concerns of many”.

They were only three minutes, but they marked the day. Never before had a parish priest raised the mining situation in public with the Governor.

Shortly after, Ruggieri was transferred to a chapel in Greater San Juan (outside the provincial capital). All suspicions pointed to Monsignor Al-

fonso Delgado, the most influential religious in the church of San Juan. Domingo Jofré, from the Jáchal Assembly, recalls that Monsignor Delgado always supported mega-mining and was always in tune with Governor Gioja's policies.

In the resistance tent of the Jáchal No Se Toca Assembly, a large photo of Pope Francis can be seen. The Encyclical "Laudato si" marked an unprecedented point in the global positioning of the Catholic Church: "The discourse of sustainable growth often becomes a diversive and



exculpatory resource that absorbs values from the ecological discourse within the logic of finance and technocracy, and the social and environmental responsibility of companies is often reduced to a

series of marketing and image actions (...) Global regulatory frameworks are needed that impose obligations and prevent intolerable actions, such as the fact that powerful companies or countries expel highly polluting waste and industries to other countries." (Laudato si, 194, 173).

State Policy

Four photos can summarize two decades of governments and their relationship with mega-mining.

President Carlos Menem in Catamarca inaugurated the exploitation stage of Minera Alumbrera (the first open pit mine in Argentina) on October 31, 1997.

On April 14, 2009, Peter Munk, founder of Barrick Gold, was received at the Government House by Cristina Fernández and the Governor of San Juan, José Luis Gioja. Two weeks later, on April 30, the governments of Chile and Argentina gave the green light to the binational Pascua-Lama project.

2016. February 12. From San Juan, the new President Mauricio Macri (PRO-Cambiamos) announced the lowering of taxes for mega-mining. To his right, the governor of San Juan, Sergio Uñac (Justicialist Party). To his left, the governor of Catamarca, Lucía Corpacci (PJ). The scene: San Juan, with mountains in the background. The reason: the announcement of a tax cut for mining companies. Macri highlighted the state policy of support, promotion and impulse to the extractive activity.

2019. December 18. President Alberto Fernández speaks at the meeting of the Argentine Business Association (AEA), a space for the largest companies in the country. He called to promote mining, even in two provinces with broad rejection (Mendoza and Chubut).

In August 2020 the Government of Alberto Fernández published resolution 47/2020. Article 1 states: "Approve the planning of the Secretariat of Mining





of the Ministry of Productive Development for the 'Strategic Plan for the Argentine Mining Development', with the purpose of consolidating the mining activity in the national productive development."

"The Strategic Plan for the Argentine Mining Development for the next 30 years proposes to consolidate the role of mining in the national productive development and the conditions required to take full advantage of the opportunities it offers", highlights the official bulletin. It highlights two main objectives: the creation of a "national round table of notables" for the creation of "a common vision for the development of the activity". It aims at building "consensus". It has a specific point to change the negative image of mega-mining: "The fourth strategic objective will be to communicate to the community the potential of mining within the framework of the national productive development model, seeking the dissemination and legitimization of mining activity".

The words "sustainability", "rational use", "environmental preservation" and "rational use of natural resources" are repeatedly mentioned. No mention is made of regions or projects in the pipeline, but for years the attempts of new projects in Jujuy, Salta, Catamarca, San Juan, La Rioja, Mendoza, Río Negro, Chubut and Santa Cruz have been public.

"These five centuries of colonial extractivist domination have not passed in vain. It has not been a passive domination. There is a whole history of struggles, a learning from past struggles. These are the seeds of humanity that remain to us. If we want to sustain and fight for the survival of humanity we

have to go to the seed bank of history, which are the resistances, the struggle of the native peoples, of women, the struggle of the workers, of all the oppressed of the world. There is a bank of knowledge that we have available today. All these struggles, different expressions against patriarchal-colonial-capitalist domination, are all necessary, but none is by itself. We are facing a great challenge of a symphony of popular struggles, it is the consciousness we have of the integration of struggles, of popular environmentalism. All this appears with a clarity that we could not see it in other moments of history."

In December 2019 there were massive mobilizations in the province of Mendoza, which succeeded in repealing a brand new law of prominence. It was a historic pueblada. Last April, in Andalgalá (Catamarca) the headquarters of Minera Agua Rica (of the multinationals Yamana Gold, Glencore and Newmont), a project that threatens the rivers of the province, burned down. In May, the Patagonian province of Chubut is mobilized against "zoning" (the government's attempt to enable extractive activity in some regions) and in rejection of the multinational Pan American Silver.

Almost seven years have passed and Ana Ruiz still remembers that night of the spill in Jáchal, the fear she felt for the contaminated water that could have affected her baby Ignacio. A long time has passed, she does not forget it and has no doubts: "Barrick and the complicit governments are unforgivable. That night we renewed with more strength than ever our struggle and our resistance, which will last forever.



CRÉDITS

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