

Mining the Connections

A Maritime Conference story

By Kathryn Anderson

In March 2004, a Guatemalan environmental leader, Jose Manuel Chacon, travelled overnight by bus to Guatemala City, arriving exhausted at the modest hostel where several Maritimers were gathered. Why such an effort? He wanted to ensure that we Canadians knew that a Vancouver-based company, then Glamis Gold, now Goldcorp, was developing a gold mine, the Marlin Mine, in Guatemala's Western Highlands. Until that day, not one of us had been aware of the presence of Canadian mining companies in Guatemala, even though some of us have been involved in human rights solidarity with Guatemala for decades. He explained that the consent of nearby Mayan communities had not been sought by the Guatemalan government. Yet these communities bear the environmental, health, and social costs and risks that come with an open-pit gold mine.

We were members of a delegation of the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network (BTS) (www.breaking-the-silence.ca), a human rights solidarity group. BTS has strong ties with the United Church through Tatamagouche Centre (www.tatacentre.ca), a United Church education centre in the Maritimes, and through its relationship with a former United Church partner in Guatemala, the Kaqchikel Presbytery. BTS is a valued partner of the Maritime Conference Church in Action Committee.

By early January 2005, the Marlin Mine was on the front page of the Guatemalan press on a daily basis. A Mayan man was killed as hundreds of police and soldiers attacked those protesting the transport along the Pan-American Highway of a cylinder destined for the mine. A BTS Canadian Intern, who happened to be travelling on a bus that was stopped due to the road blockage, was advised by another passenger to identify herself as an American rather than a Canadian for safety's sake, in the face of feelings against the Canadian mining company in the area.

Since that time, BTS has developed strong relationships with community and church leaders (Catholic and Protestant) resisting the presence of the Goldcorp mine. Several United Church members have been on BTS annual delegations. One delegation spent a day at the mine, talking with mine staff. Over the years, delegates have met with women, men, and children deeply affected by the mine. It is wrenching to hear them speak of unrelenting pressure to sell even more land so that the mine can expand; to see with our own eyes structural damage to homes caused by underground explosions and heavy vehicles speeding through villages; to meet children with skin diseases that are likely caused by the presence of heavy metals in the water where children bathe, play, and help their mothers with the laundry.

In 2008, a BTS member and Goldcorp shareholder submitted a resolution to the Annual Meeting of Goldcorp, asking the company to halt any plans to expand the mine and/or acquire new land without the free, prior, and informed consent of affected communities. Goldcorp rejected this resolution. "The Corporation's view is that the proposed resolution appears clearly not to relate in a significant way to the business or affairs of the Corporation." The company's response influenced Jantzi Research, an adviser on socially responsible investment, to de-list Goldcorp as an ethical investment.

Through our experiences, we came to recognize that Canadians are unaware of the negative impacts of Canadian mining companies around the world. As Christians, we felt called to break the silence. Encouraged by the Maritime Conference Church in Action Committee, the Mining the Connections Working Group was formed. We produced a kit on ethical issues related to mining in Guatemala and Colombia (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick power companies purchase coal from the Cerrejon Mine, a mine in Colombia, known for its human rights violations and forced community evictions.) We followed this up with a speaking tour of churches by committee members Linda Scherzinger and Jackie McVicar. We have supported visits to the Maritimes by Guatemalans resisting mining. We hosted, with Tatamagouche Centre, a two-day forum on ethics and mining. Eighty participants from churches, unions, Aboriginal groups, environmental groups, local mining-affected community groups, students, and Amnesty International members focused on local and global issues. These included uranium mining, concerns about quarries and strip-mining of coal in the Maritimes, shareholder advocacy, and support for struggles around mining in Colombia and Appalachia. Participants were enormously appreciative of the United Church providing this rare opportunity for ethical reflection.

Our committee gained new energy and resolve in early 2009 when Nicole Smith, a Maritimer who had been a United Church overseas personnel in the Philippines, joined the Mining the Connections Working Group. She told us her story:

"In 2008 I worked as overseas personnel in the Philippines with the Cordillera Human Rights Alliance, the human rights documentation branch of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance. During my placement, the CPA was working with an Indigenous community whose land had been granted illegally to a Canadian mining company for exploration. I was part of the team responsible for documenting the violent military repression that resulted because of the community's opposition to the proposed mine. During the course of the anti-mining campaign, I had to document the illegal detention and harassment of the father of my host family in the community. Though the community succeeded in halting the exploration, a second Canadian company has applied to test the area for gold. Like many United Church members who have worked with overseas partners facing the threat of mining, I worry about what will happen to this community as the economic crisis leads to increased investment in Canadian gold companies."

Just before Easter 2009, the Mining the Connections Working Group of Maritime Conference learned that the United Church Pension Plan invests in Goldcorp. Our discovery led to last summer's 40th General Council approving Proposal 19 (<http://gc40.united-church.ca/en/node/640>). It asks the General Secretary of General Council to seek independent legal and financial opinion to ensure that the United Church investment policy be applied to all investments. It states that the United Church will avoid investing in any company that:

- (a) has ignored or failed to take into account the needs and interests of communities affected negatively by its operations or planned operations. Evidence of such failure may be found in a lack of engagement in public consultation, especially in the face of community opposition and
- (b) has ignored or failed to take into account the needs, interests, and rights of Aboriginal communities affected by its operations or planned operations.

It also asks that the Pension Board include a representative of the Mining the Connections Working Group in its engagement with Goldcorp, and that the Pension Board also engage with representatives of the affected communities to ensure that their concerns are named in engagement with Goldcorp.

The Mining the Connections Working Group looks forward to the full implementation of the resolution. There is an emerging acceptance in Canada and around the world of placing greater emphasis on ethical considerations in pension plan investment, while also meeting a pension plan's financial obligations to its members. It is our hope that the United Church can be a leader, ensuring that socially responsible investment criteria are integral to pension investment criteria. We believe that the Pension Board can meet both goals, that is, ensure that the fund meets its financial obligations to current and future pensioners and apply fully the ethical criteria of United Church investment policy.

Little did we know when Jose Manuel Chacon walked into the hostel in Guatemala City six years ago that we would find ourselves in dialogue with the Pension Board of the United Church. It is our deepest hope that the work of the Mining the Connections Committee will support the struggles of mining-affected communities around the world, including many United Church partners. It is our prayer that United Church members, including Pension Plan members, will become aware that all of us can contribute to making a more just world through our personal economic decisions, and the decisions we take together as a part of the Body of Christ.