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Book Review

A window into courageous resistance

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Aviva Chomsky, Garry Leech and Steve Striffler, eds., The People Behind Colombian Coal: Mining, Multinationals and Human Rights. Bogotá: Casa Editorial Pisando Callos, 2007, 200pp.

Washington's man in Bogotá, President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, made international headlines in early March when the Colombian military murdered members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's largest guerrilla organization, in Ecuadorian territory.

Among the dead was Luis Edgar Devia Silva, aka Raúl Reyes, the FARC's chief spokesperson and a key participant in the recently negotiated release of several hostages who had been held by the FARC. The ongoing hostage negotiations were being mediated successfully by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Uribe's assault on the FARC guerrillas in Ecuador was a stark illustration of the regime's belligerent refusal to allow for serious steps toward a negotiated settlement to Colombia's civil war. To the contrary, Uribe's latest move suggests that he will continue to serve the Colombian ruling class and imperial interests of the US and other major capitalist powers, orchestrating from on high a war of state terror against any and all dissent and resistance. [1]

In the immediate aftermath of the Colombian state murders in Ecuador, massive demonstrations were held across Colombia and throughout the world on March 6 on behalf of Colombians killed by state or paramilitary violence. [2] One of the immediate consequences has been renewed paramilitary terror and threats against trade unionists and human-rights activists involved in organizing the marches and protests. Carmen Cecilia Carvajal, a teacher, was killed on March 4. Leonidas Gómez Rozo, a member of the bank workers' union, Unión Nacional de Empleados Bancarios, was murdered the next day. Gildardo Gómez Alzato, a teacher and member of the Asociación de Institutores de Antioquia, was likewise assassinated on March 7. Carlos Burbano, the Vice-President of the Hospital Workers Union, Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores Hospitalarios, was murdered on March 11. On top of these deaths, 28 other human rights activists and numerous social organizations have been threatened by a paramilitary group calling itself the "Black Eagles." In their communiqués they warn that all the organizers of the March 6th demonstrations are future targets. [3]

It has been well-established that transnational capital operating in the extractive resource industries of Colombia has played a central part in perpetuating civil war and backing military and paramilitary terror against the civilian population. [4] These processes have been occurring against a more general backdrop of neoliberal restructuring since the 1990s. Wealth has become more concentrated, dispossession of land and resources has accelerated, exploitation of labour has intensified, and the dislocation of peasants and indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities has reached astounding heights. Karl Marx's notion of "primitive accumulation" remains incredibly apt as a tool for understanding twenty-first century capitalism in Colombia.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Cerrejon.jpg>]

El Cerrejon, North Zone

Social movement activists, trade unionists, leftist political leaders, and peasants deemed to be supporters of the guerrilla insurgency, experience threats, assassinations and other human rights abuses at the hands of the armed forces and paramilitary groups as part of a cruel routine. [5] Roughly three million people have been displaced in the twenty-first century in Colombia. [6] Two million of these were displaced from mining regions. [7] Levels of violence in mining zones defy the imagination, as do the poverty rates in these regions.

All of this makes the publication of *The People Behind Colombian Coal* timely and important. Two of the editors, Aviva Chomsky and Steve Striffler, are scholar-activists, and Garry Leech is a journalist, author, activist and editor of

the on-line publication, Colombia Journal. All three have made important contributions to our understanding of Latin American politics, imperialism, and capitalism in the past. [8] This latest collective effort is a very good collection of short articles, testimonies, and primary documents that together cover mining capitalism, state power, imperialism and dispossession on the one hand, and the resistance dynamics of community, union, and international solidarity struggles on the other.

The focus of the book is the human devastation wrought by the world's largest open-pit coal mine, El Cerrejón, in La Guajira, in northern Colombia. The basic thesis tying together the various strands is that "multinational mining companies that own El Cerrejón profit at the expense of the 'people' of the Guajira region whose plight has remained hidden 'behind the Colombian coal' that many of us in North America and Europe rely on to generate our electricity" (13). The testimonies and analyses are drawn from, sociologists, anthropologists, environmentalists, lawyers, medical doctors, indigenous and Afro-Colombian community activists, and Colombian and North American trade unionists.

The Guajira peninsula is a Colombian department – state – in which roughly one third of the population is indigenous Wayuu, Colombia's largest indigenous group. The Wayuu live primarily in the arid northern area of the peninsula, where the coal port and railroad are located. However, as will become clear in the rest of the review, there are also indigenous Wayuu and Afro-Colombian settlements in the southern part, where the mine itself is located.

The book is structured into four parts. It begins with an analysis of how multinational corporations are structured, helping to explain their brutally exploitative behaviour in the mining zones. Second, the book provides a series of articles written between 1983 and the current period that addresses the multifaceted impact of the mining developments in La Guajira: socio-cultural, environmental, economic, and health-related. A third section provides further documentation of health and human rights problems stemming from the mine's operations, as well as a report by the mine workers union expressing its solidarity with the displaced Afro-Colombian and indigenous Wayuu communities. The last section outlines developments in the growing campaign of international solidarity around reparations for communities displaced by the mine since 2001 and in defence of communities and mine workers still under threat today.

Since there is no way of capturing the sheer diversity of subject matter and important empirical observations offered up in the book in a review such as this, I will simply focus on what I suggest are three major themes running through the text: accumulation by dispossession, social movement unionism and indigenous and Afro-Colombian resistance, and international solidarity.

Accumulation by Dispossession

The Marxist geographer David Harvey recently developed the concept of accumulation by dispossession as a way of updating and refining Karl Marx's notion of primitive accumulation. Marx highlighted processes of capital accumulation based upon predation, fraud, and violence, but saw them as something unique to a "primitive" or "original" stage in the historical development of capitalism. Harvey argues, by contrast, that these predatory practices have in fact been a continuous characteristic of capitalism, a facet of the system intensified during the onset of neoliberalism in the mid-1970s. [9] In the neoliberal era, assets previously held under collective ownership, either by the state or in common, have been forced on an unprecedented scale into the realm of the market, often through fraud, coercion, and innumerable forms of predation both by the state and powerful private actors. In other words, many forms of public property have been commodified, have entered into the market as commodities for buying and selling. The intensification of commodification has included the commodification of labour on a grand scale, or the proletarianization of huge swathes of the world's population. This process of proletarianization is often engendered through the violent dispossession of the land of peasants and indigenous communities, and the subsequent coercive

migration of these populations into urban centres in search of means of sustaining themselves, now with only their labour to sell. The private appropriation of natural resources in the Third World and the manipulation of the national debts of poor countries by the core capitalist state powers are other facets of accumulation by dispossession. Third World ruling classes and states have been instrumental players in these coercive processes, but most important have been the capitalist classes of the core imperial powers, the states that rule in the interests of these classes, multinational corporations, and the central international financial institutions – the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and others.

While Harvey's insights are unexamined in this text for good reason – it is primarily a collection of testimonies and local analyses geared toward a broad audience – we see the processes of accumulation by dispossession unfolding in bold fashion in many of the experiences and situations described. Between 1981 and 1986 the 50/50 public-private partnership between the state-owned enterprise Carbones de Colombia (Carbocol) and Intercor, a subsidiary of Exxon (later ExxonMobil) began the construction stage of a three phase mining development of Cerrejón North Zone. A number of indigenous Wayuu communities, inhabiting the area since before the Spanish conquest, were dispossessed of their lands to facilitate the construction of the mine's railroad and port. In 2001, the Afro-Colombian town of Tabaco was destroyed and the residents forcibly removed by state security forces to allow for the mine's expansion. As of 2007 the communities of Chanqueta, Patilla, Roche, Los Remedios and Tamaquito continued to be threatened with displacement by the mines. In the interim, the resident's lives have become almost unbearable because of the mine's strategic purchase of all surrounding land that used to be utilized by community residents for hunting and farming, or, alternatively, it provided sources of nearby farm employment. As a consequence, traveling to distant locations for seasonal work is increasingly common for men, with all the negative attendant consequences for community and family life. Here is Colombian sociologist María-a Cristina González Hernández on the Afro-Colombian town of Tabaco, in the municipality of Hatonuevo, in the department of Guajira:

“The population is surrounded by the coal complex. In economic terms, the restrictions on livestock-raising, loss of pasture land, loss of neighbors to ally with, and the diminution of hunting and fishing, have compromised the community's economic survival. This situation has been aggravated by the State, which has declared the land a mining reserve, approved the town's expropriation, and suspended health, education, and Telecom services. Altogether, these factors have brought about pathologies and crisis for the community” (66).

Anthropologist Deborah Pacini Hernandez observed some of these trends in Wayuu territory in Guajira as early as 1983. In her contribution to the volume she points out that, “There has been and will continue to be loss of territorial rights as the project and others like it intrude into the Guajira. In addition to the loss of land to development projects (whether mining, tourism, military or otherwise), there will be loss of land to entrepreneurs and opportunists who will be moving to the Guajira and will be expropriating, legally or illegally, Wayuu traditional territory” (41). In addition to land dispossessed in the interior, the loss of “coastal land will result in the loss of offshore marine resources, such as fish, shellfish, turtles, etc., that the Wayuu rely upon to supplement their diet and income. These coastal resources will be further reduced as increased commercial maritime activity results in the deterioration of offshore waters” (42). The construction of roads and railroads on the peninsula “will disrupt the traditional patterns of Wayuu transhumance as they move with their herds in search of water and pasture” (42).

Pacini Hernandez goes on to address explicitly the brutal stages of proletarianization that follow: “Traditional land management techniques and knowledge will be lost as the Wayuu are pressured to abandon their traditional subsistence strategies and work for the Cerrejón project and others that will follow.... The loss of this knowledge and of the land on which to practice it will probably result in the further proletarianization of the Wayuu, leaving them at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, without their culture for support. This process has already begun in the case of many Wayuu who have migrated to urban centers.... The Wayuu have become slum dwellers, with unemployment and underemployment rendering them vulnerable to all the social problems typical of such conditions” (42).

In 2000, the Colombian government privatized Carbocol, selling its 50 percent share of the mining company to a multinational mining consortium comprised of BHP Billiton, Anglo-American, and Glencore. The pace of accumulation by dispossession merely accelerated. This is perhaps best reflected in the case of the town of Tabaco. Armando Pérez Araña – a member of the indigenous organization Yanama, the Mines and Communities Network, and a lawyer for the communities displaced or under threat by the Cerrejón mine – contributes an important article on this topic. Pérez Araña's analysis illustrates how state coercion and legal manipulation is often a critical component of accumulation by dispossession in the neoliberal age. He shows how the then Minister of Mines and Energy, Carlos Caballero Argáez, "in a clear flouting of national laws, authorized and promoted the administrative phase of the improperly-tagged 'expropriation' of what was disingenuously termed 'a plot of land called Tabaco.'" The so-called plot of land "was declared necessary for public and social use. The terminology suggested that the 'plot of land' was an uninhabited rural area. It ignored the physical existence of an organized human community.... We have petitioned the relevant authorities to revoke the illegal, unjust and arbitrary administrative act that set the process into motion. Invariably, we have received a negative response that left us no doubt that we were facing a formidable web of lies designed to defend the illegal mining operation at the cost of the social stability of an obviously fragile community" (98-99).

What the different components of the book illustrate together is how mining capitalists are the immediate agents behind the dispossession and displacement of indigenous Wayuu and Afro-Colombian communities in Guajira, and the exploitation of the workers in the mine. Yet, these immediate agents rely on Colombian state power and the power of imperialism enacted through core states in the Global North – and in particular the US state – to enforce the coercive and legal components involved in accumulation by dispossession in the mining industry.

The book is not a one-sided description of the indestructible power of capital, state and empire, however. Indeed, it documents in detail how the indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and the labour movement have fought back – in the face of a fiercely hostile environment – seeking to alter the balance of power and achieve at least a modicum of dignity and social justice in the short term. More recently, international solidarity has been added to this equation, with important consequences.

Social Movement Unionism

Social movement unionism, as labour historian Kim Moody has pointed out, seeks to multiply "its political and social power by reaching out to other sectors of the class, be they other unions, neighbourhood-based organizations, or other social movements. It fights for all the oppressed and enhances its own power by doing so." [10] Another important contribution The People Behind Colombian Coal makes is its description of the way in which the mine workers union at the Cerrejón Mine, Sintracarbón, came to adapt a perspective of social movement unionism near the end of 2006, in the sense of making solidarity with displaced indigenous Wayuu and Afro-Colombian communities a central facet of its struggle.

Four members of the union were participants in an international delegation – organized in part by Chomsky, Leech, and Striffler – that traveled to several of the affected communities in Guajira and listened to testimonies of residents about how the mine had negatively impacted on their lives. The delegates subsequently went back to their union and successfully argued for the inclusion of the struggles of the communities into the union's bargaining at the mine. A national and international declaration of Sintracarbón, issued after the international delegation, includes the following passage: "Sintracarbón has committed itself to the struggle of the communities affected by the mine's expansion. We invite all other unions and social organizations in Colombia, and especially La Guajira, to join in the struggle of these communities for better conditions and quality of life, and to take on the communities' problems as our own. As a union committed to the struggle of these communities, we have established the short-term goal of working to help unify the affected communities, to participate in their meetings, to take a stand with the local and national authorities

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regarding the absence of public services in the communities, and to begin a dialogue with the company about the reality we are now aware of, and to take a public stand locally, nationally, and internationally about the situation of the communities affected by the Cerrejón mine and its expansion” (125).

At the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007 the union entered into bargaining negotiations with the company. The bargaining process quickly broke down and 98 percent of the union members who voted – there was a turnout rate of 76 percent – favoured a strike. Sintracarbón’s communiqué calling for a strike vote makes the following statements that reiterate its position in solidarity with the indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in conflict with the mining capitalists:

“In addition to labor demands, our petition includes social demands, such as those regarding subcontracted/temporary workers, and those regarding communities. The communities near the mine, and the communities displaced by the mine’s expansion, also have the right to collective negotiations. All of the communities should be relocated [the eventual demand coming from the communities themselves given the dire environmental pollution and social conditions established by this point]. They should be paid compensation for the loss of their cultural patrimony, and the loss of their ancestors [in reference, it seems, to the displacement of community cemeteries described elsewhere in the book].... The Cerrejón Company and its enormous profits should not be based on leaving behind sick workers and impoverished communities” (131).

Aviva Chomsky explains how Sintracarbón representatives first came to be aware of and involved in community struggles in 2006, after an extended period in which the union’s struggles had been quite separate and distinct: “... the union president accepted our invitation to the conference, and I think that he was very moved by hearing the testimonies from the people from the communities, and also by the level of international interest. He asked us if we would return in November to accompany their upcoming contract negotiations, and vowed to work to raise consciousness in his union about the dire situation of the communities. The union designated three people to accompany our delegation for several days of intense meetings with the communities. They were appalled to see the conditions there, and worked to incorporate language requiring the mine to negotiate with the communities into their own collective bargaining proposal. They also began to work on other ways they as a union could support the communities’ struggle” (154).

Jeff Crosby, President of the North Shore Labor Council in Lynn, Massachusetts was part of the international delegation that visited indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities affected by the mine in Guajira in November 2006. He connected the efforts in Colombia to build union-community linkages to his own experiences in Massachusetts as a worker at a General Electric aircraft engine plant. He notes that it is “possible for members of my union to drive through the poorer new immigrant communities from Central and South American and Southeast Asia each day on their way to work, with little understanding of the life conditions of these communities” (165-166). Looking at the Colombian and American scenarios, Crosby concludes that, “overcoming the chasm between the organized and unorganized sectors of workers, between those with a decent living and those living on the edge, and between native-born workers and migrant workers, is a critical challenge facing trade unions in both the United States and Colombia” (166).

He was impressed with Sintracarbón’s emerging commitment to this sort of solidarity, and the eventual success the union had at forcing the mine’s management to accept discussion of community issues as an acceptable topic at the negotiating table. Management had been vociferously opposed for obvious reasons: “The statement by Cerrejón management inviting the union into its discussions with the community about the impact of the mines on those communities is an important step, since it accepts in principle that the communities and the union have joint interests and a right to negotiate together with the employer” (167).

International Solidarity

Undoubtedly one of the most valuable components of this book is its step-by-step description – through the narratives of various key organizers, including the editors – of how international solidarity was built around the defence of displaced communities and workers struggles in Guajira mining zones in a manner that responded to the interests, needs, and visions of the communities and workers themselves. This final section of the book achieves two important objectives that are undoubtedly important to the editors. First, it shows readers in imperialist countries without a personal history of activism how they might become involved in these struggles and why it's important that they do. (It also provides additional arsenal for more seasoned international solidarity activists.)

Second, the section on international solidarity illustrates how the struggles of oppressed groups and exploited workers at home are often integrally connected to the struggles in seemingly far-off Guajira, Colombia. There are abundant examples pointing to the necessity of international working class solidarity. One participant in the international delegation in November 2006 was Richard J. Charlo, a member of the Dene, Dogrib First Nation in the Northwest Territories, Canada. He has been employee of a diamond mine owned by BHP Billiton Diamond Inc. for eight years. Charlo describes how the same employer of Colombian mine workers in Guajira also exploits indigenous populations in Northern Canada. Charlo explains how he “had an important opportunity to visit the coal fields of Colombia and learn about the displacement of Aboriginal people by the Cerrejón Mine. I also learned about the treatment of the mine workers. The culture and customs are very different from our own and the working conditions are deplorable. However, the local people living near the mine are affected in similar ways as we were here in northern Canada. In the back of my mind, I know that if BHP could get away with it, they would treat us the same way they treat their workers abroad” (179).

The volume shows how unions in Colombia often feel that international solidarity is not simply a symbolic gesture. International consciousness and solidarity, in fact, can provide a certain amount of coverage and protection to union activists working in what is often referred to as the most dangerous country in the world for union activity. Thus when the International Commission in Support of Sintracarbón and the Communities Affected by Cerrejón was established and travelled to Colombia to monitor the contract negotiations, Sintracarbón's bargaining power – and those of the displaced communities – was measurably enhanced (154).

Shortcomings

The People Behind Colombian Coal contains some weaker material that diminishes the books overall impact. S.L. Reiter's chapter on “The Ethics of Cerrejón and the Multinationals,” is one example. In effect, it amounts to a moral critique of the ethics of multinational mining corporations without a corresponding critique of the underlying system of capitalism. Reiter's muddled conclusion is that, “Members of Cerrejón and the parent companies are responsible for their actions that have led to serious human rights violations against the people of the Guajira region. They are blameworthy and have a responsibility to remedy the situation” (36). A resistance based on appealing to the moral conscience of corporate officials is irredeemably naïve. Again, the rest of the book yields substantial empirical evidence that rebukes the implicit politics behind Reiter's chapter. A second, more serious, failing of the book is the contribution by Jaime Ernesto Salas Bahamón, described in his bio as, “a civil engineer and specialist in environmental policy and energy technology who coordinated Cerrejón's Environmental Management Plan in 2002-2003” (84). Why his chapter – a none-too-subtle defence of neoliberal mining capitalism – is included is difficult to comprehend. Finally, the book would have benefited from an additional introductory chapter on the basic contemporary context of Colombia's war economy and political history over the last three decades. There is a useful timetable at the outset, but this is insufficient in my view. The rest of the book is highly accessible, but such a contextual backdrop would undoubtedly help the uninitiated reader digest some of the empirical detail with greater ease.

Conclusion

These shortcomings should not take away from the very important achievements of this book. The editors have very clearly been intimately involved with the developing international solidarity campaign and, in their interactions with community struggles and the labour movement in Guajira, are living examples of what scholarly-activism, rooted in real struggle, can achieve. *People Behind the Coal* is full of useful testimony, analysis, and reflection on the state of contemporary capitalism as it expresses itself in the mining zones of Guajira, Colombia. The book provides empirical verification of Harvey's notion of accumulation by dispossession, reveals the potential power of social movement unionism, opens a window into courageous indigenous and Afro-Colombian resistance, and explains the existing foundations and future possibilities of international solidarity with Colombians struggling against the economic and state terror of the status quo. *People Behind the Coal* will therefore be a valuable resource for activists, students, and critical scholars alike.

[1] For the best account of the Colombian military's incursion into Ecuador and its regional effects see Forrest Hylton, "Colombia's Cornered President Raises the Stakes," *Nacla News*, March 5, 2008, available at: www.news.nacla.org.

[2] See William I. Robinson, "Photo Essay: Colombia – Massive Demonstrations against Paramilitary and State Terror," *Upside Down World*, March 7, 2008, available at: www.upsidedownworld.org.

[3] Adam Isacson, "Human Rights Takes a Beating in Colombia: Paramilitary Threats and Assassinations," *Counterpunch*, March 21, 2008, available at: www.counterpunch.org.

[4] For the important role played by Canadian capital and the Canadian state see Todd Gordon and Jeffery R. Webber, "Imperialism and Resistance: Canadian Mining Companies in Latin America," *Third World Quarterly* 29, 1: 63-87, 2008.

[5] William Avilés, "Paramilitarism and Colombia's Low-Intensity Democracy," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38 (2), 2003. p 380.

[6] Forrest Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia*, London and New York: Verso, 2006, p. 4.

[7] Francisco Ramírez Cuellar, *The Profits of Extermination: How US Corporate Power is Destroying Colombia*, pp 84-85.

[8] Aviva Chomsky teaches Latin American History at Salem State College in Salem, Massachusetts. She is the author of *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Colombia and the Making of a Global Working Class*; "They Take Our Jobs!" and 20 Other Myths about Immigration; and *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940*. She is also co-editor of *The Cuba Reader* and *Identity and Struggle at the Margins of the Nation-State*. Garry Leech is a journalist and teaches Political Science at Cape Breton University. He is the author of *Crude Interventions: The United States, Oil and the New World (Dis)Order* and *Killing Peace: Colombia's Conflict and the Failure of US Intervention*. *Colombia Journal*, the on-line publication he edits, is available at: www.colombiajournal.org. Steve Striffler teaches Anthropology at the University of Arkansas. He is the author of *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food* and *In the Shadow of Capital: United Fruit, Popular Struggle and Agrarian Restructuring in Ecuador, 1900-1995*. He is also co-editor of *Banana Wars: Power, Production and History in the Americas*.

[9] See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; and David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso.

[10] Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*, New York and London: Verso, 1997, p. 207.