

Resisting the New Conquistadors: Salvadorans Mobilize Against Gold Mining

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Salvadorans Mobilize Against Gold Mining

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In the fields above Carasque, you can still find shrapnel from bombs the Salvadoran Air Force dropped on the village in the 1980s. Early this fall, signs of a new threat began appearing on the mountainside – survey tags left by a Canadian mining company searching for gold.

Benigno Orellana, the community's representative to the Municipal Council in Nueva Trinidad, says, "Right now, the permission is for exploration, later it will be for exploitation." He's worried:

"If the mining companies come in, it will be worse than the twelve years of war. This is a project of death for our communities and a project of wealth for those who exploit us. They will leave behind a desert where we can't sustain our crops, can't feed our animals, and can't get water to drink."

That's a fate people in Carasque aren't willing to accept – after surviving decades of violence and repression, they are not about to allow a mining company to force them off their land.

Earlier this year, the Salvadoran government granted two Canadian companies – Au Martinique Silver and Intrepid Minerals – licenses for gold exploration in the Department of Chalatenango, near the Honduran border. [Au Martinique's website](#)

promises investors that “El Salvador has the lowest risk profile for investment in all of Central America.” But what they haven’t taken into account is the region’s strong history of community organizing, and the lengths its people are willing to go to to defend their land and their livelihood.

A Project of Death

According to [Oxfam America](#), “Gold mining is one of the most destructive activities in the world. The production of one gold ring generates 20 tons of waste.” Cyanide, used to separate gold from ore, can be deadly in small doses. It leaches into groundwater and soil where it can persist for years.

Most people in Chalatenango are subsistence farmers, growing what they can in poor soil, and supplementing their meager earnings with money sent by relatives living and working in the U.S. Debt has already driven many families off the land, and with cheap imports from subsidized farms in the U.S. driving crop prices down, many more will have to leave the land in the years to come. Water and soil contamination from gold mining could deal the final blow to communities like Carasque that are already struggling to survive.

Community leaders don’t believe the mining companies’ promises of jobs and prosperity. [Esperanza Ortega](#), a legendary organizer from the town of Arcatao, says:

“They tell us they are going to bring employment to our community, but based on the investigation we’ve done on the experiences of other communities around, they say that, they give employment to a few people for awhile, and then when they decide it’s time to bring machinery in, it’s just the specialists, the people that can run the machinery, and they kick all the other workers out.”

Though life in the countryside is hard, rural poverty has advantages over urban poverty – people have food to eat and a close-knit community. Maximino, the legal secretary for the Carasque’s community council, says:

“If the mining were to happen on our hillside, we would be forced to move to other parts of the country. After living in this community, and having our land to work, relocating to huts, one next to another, would be very hard.”

Reports from neighboring countries confirm the fears that people from Carasque express. Another Canadian company, Greenstone Resources Limited, carried out mining operations in Honduras in the 1990s. In a [recent report published by the human rights group Project Underground](#), Honduran activist Miguel Miranda describes his community’s experience:

“Our community has existed on this land for nearly 200 years. When the company Greenstone came they offered us employment and promised to leave our road, the cemetery and surrounding lands intact. But we were fooled. The company’s explosions shake our homes and their open pit is swallowing our homes, causing landslides and cracks in our walls and foundations. They close our road so we have no access to our homes and their heavy equipment put our children’s lives at risk. When we complain, the Mining Department says that we have to understand that this is for the good of the country...”

Mayan communities in [Guatemala](#) are facing similar struggles. The conflict over Glamis Gold’s mining project in the San Marcos highlands turned violent in January when the military and police deployed to the region to suppress protests and help a Canadian company move new equipment into an indigenous community. Security forces killed at least one man.

Benigno Orellana foresees a similar situation in Chalatanango, “Besides facilitating the miners with whatever permits they need, the government will give them security through the military and police.” But the people of the region are no strangers to confrontation, and won’t back down.

A History of Resistance

Chalatenango was and still is a stronghold of the FMLN, the former guerrilla movement that has now become El Salvador’s main opposition political party. In her book *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, New York University political science professor Elizabeth Jean Wood writes that during the war:

“...in Chalatenango, guerrilla leaders encouraged residents to participate in local organizations called poder popular local (local popular power). The purpose of these organizations was to provide food and health to local residents as well as guerilla forces, typically through cooperative buying of seeds and fertilizers and marketing of surplus as well as the cultivation of some land for cooperative consumption.”

At the height of the war the FMLN blew up the main bridge over the Rio Sumpul leading into Chalatenango to prevent the military from attacking these organized communities.

Wood notes that “their infrastructure was destroyed and participants widely dispersed during the intensifying bombing campaign that began in 1984.” In the summer of 1984, a group of displaced people in San Salvador formed [CRIPDES](#) (then called the Christian Community for the Displaced of El Salvador, now the Association for the Development of Rural Communities of El Salvador) and

began helping refugees return from camps in Honduras and Nicaragua to [repopulate their communities](#) and reconstitute the community councils the FMLN had established. Those who returned faced severe violence and repression from the Salvadoran military, but persevered with the help of solidarity movements in El Salvador and the U.S. The community councils – which include representatives of the church, the health sector, women’s groups, youth groups, the schools, and the agricultural cooperatives – continue to form the basis of local government in Chalatenango today. The Association of Communities for the Development of Chalatenango (CCR in its Spanish initials) pulls together representatives of these community councils to work together on common challenges.

In the fifteen-odd years since the end of the war, the CCR has helped communities resist threats ranging from the government’s attempt to shut down Rio Sumpul, the community radio station, to a campaign visit from presidential candidate of the ruling ARENA party, which has strong links to the death squads that murdered thousands of Salvadoran civilians in the 1980’s. Santiago Serrano of the CCR says:

“In Chalatenango, we’ve always tried to defend what is ours. They tried to take away our community radio station, before it was a legal station. The police came to try and take away our equipment and take away our station. In the community we all came out, and we occupied the station and we didn’t let them take it. They tried to arrest community leaders, the community came out and defended them, and they weren’t able to take them away. The ARENA presidential candidate came into our communities trying to cover us all with lies, in the last presidential campaign, we got him out with rocks and bees, and we even got him all out of the whole province of Chalatenango. So we even got a candidate out of here. Now the mining companies come in and we hope that everyone together will kick them out too. They had to airlift the presidential candidate out of there, because people were so angry.”

Echoing Serrano’s words, Esperanza Ortega says that the mining companies need to know that

“If they come into this zone they are going to have a lot of problems, because remember we are dealing with people from these communities who survived the war, and there some us, when we lose control, we don’t even know what we can do.”

Organizing Against Mining

People in Chalatenango have been organizing against the mining companies since the first prospecting teams began to arrive in the region earlier this year. Serrano explains:

“First they came into the municipality of San Jose Las Flores, and met with community council and the mayor’s office to say that they wanted to explore the area. And so the community leaders said, let’s talk to the entire community, and all the population and then we’ll tell you. And they came back again. And they got their answer, that ‘No means no.’ But then they kept coming into the community, this time without permission from anybody and started doing some explorations.”

Farmers began removing the concrete markers and metal tags the mining companies left on their land. And as the miners moved into new communities, resistance began to spread. 15 mayors and virtually all the parish priests in Chalatenango have come out against the mining projects.

At the national level, social movement organizations are working with attorneys and legislators to mount a legal challenge to the mining licenses. They have also pulled together key organizers to study the example of the [popular movement in Cochabamba, Bolivia](#) that succeeded in defeating water privatization in 2000 in order to develop new strategies for road blockades and mass demonstrations.

The CCR has now mobilized people in 100 communities to oppose the mining. Serrano says:

“Throughout the whole northeast region of Chalatenango, people are getting to know about the impacts of the mining projects and all of the owners say they are not going to sell. This is a historical province of the country, lots of people died on these lands and the owners are not about to sell them.”

And in October, Au Martinique Silver and Intrepid Minerals saw for the first time the lengths to which *Chalaticos* are willing to go to defend their land.

Confrontation on the Highway

On the morning of October 15 a team of workers from Au Martinique Silver drove up the Northern Highway toward San Jose Las Flores and Guarjila. When members of the CCR spotted the miners, they rang the church bells in the two communities, and, in Serrano’s words, “people came running like ants.”

Before long, several hundred people had gathered and were completely blocking the road. Ortega reports that:

“There were people who were so excited and so angry that they got their matches out and wanted to start and set fire to the cars. We said ‘No, wait. This is the first time they’ve come.’ Then one of the war wounded got up on the cab of the truck, stood on the cab of

the truck, and said, 'Listen, Sirs, I am a survivor of the war..., ' — and his hand, he's missing his arm — 'I am a survivor of this war, and I know these lands very well. I know them step by step, and I am going to defend them. We need a society that's uncontaminated. We need a society that's safe for our children, for our grandchildren. And I struggled and gave my life to these lands and this struggle. And so I'm not going to let you take them now.'"

After about an hour, people pulled together all the cars and trucks in the two communities and formed a caravan to follow the miners back to the departmental capital, the city of Chalatenango, and make sure they didn't return.

A month later, on November 16, the anniversary of the 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter by the Salvadoran military, the MPR-12 (October 12 Popular Resistance Movement), a coalition of labor unions, farming cooperatives, and community groups that came together to oppose the [Central American Free Trade Agreement \(CAFTA\)](#) organized coordinated demonstrations around the country, and thousands turned out in Chalatenango to block the main highway again. The MPR-12 sees the mining project as part of the same corporate agenda that drove the trade agreement, and the demonstration in Chalatenango focussed largely on the mining issue and on the construction of hydroelectric dams being built to generate electricity for factories in Honduras and Nicaragua.

Jesse Kates-Chinoy, a solidarity activist from Maine, reported that:

"In Chalatenango, approximately 2,000 people gathered under the intense sun to occupy all four lanes of the Northern Highway, stopping traffic for a full two hours. The Northern Highway is used heavily for land transportation of products from the U.S. and Mexico to points south, and for the two hours that the protesters had the road closed, the line of tractor-trailer trucks grew in both directions..."

"Perhaps the issue which ignited people the most was that of the proposed open-pit mineral mining in the Chalatenango province. Canadian mining companies have come into communities throughout the northeastern region of Chalatenango, and begun to conduct explorations, preliminary excavations, and lay markers for mines from which they say they plan to extract gold, silver, and other valuable minerals. The communities, however, are adamant that they will not let the companies into their communities to exploit their lands, and they will defend their rights at all costs. 'Mineral mining by foreign companies in our lands is foreign intervention in our communities' declared Lisandro Monje, historic leader from the community of San José Las Flores, one of

the communities in the sights of the mining companies. Mineral mining in Central America has a dark history, and the organized communities of Chalatenango are familiar with the process of bribery, pressure, threats, violence and displacement that the mining projects have brought to other communities. The Chalatenango communities are determined to not let it happen to them. 'The moment that these Canadian gentlemen try to come into our communities, we are going to show them the true strength of the organized Salvadoran people,' Lisandro continued, 'and if it becomes necessary to take the measures that nobody wants to take in order to defend our communities, then we will have to do so.' Coming from communities of people who despite 12 years in a war zone under the Scorched Earth military strategy came to reclaim their lands, and coming from Lisandro, who led the early stages of organizing the armed resistance movement to defend their families, these are strong words."

The mining issue has mobilized people in an area with a long history of fierce struggle, creating a sense of urgency not seen since the end of the war. Word is spreading to other parts of the country affected by mining. Ortega says, "People from Calaienes, people from Cuzcatlan, who are also facing mining projects have said, if you start the struggle, we're going to join it, and we're going to continue it."

Au Martinique Silver and Intrepid Minerals are already beginning to see that gold mining in El Salvador may not be the safe business prospect they expected – and the struggle has just begun.

*Read more of **Sean Donahue**'s work at www.seandonahue.org.*