

Negros Cimarrones

Afro-Colombian Resistance in La Guajira

By CAITLIN R. RINGWOOD

Colombia can be viewed as the bastion of United States sponsored neoliberalism. Rich in natural resources like coal, gas, and gold- the history and success of extractive industries in Colombia are a testament to globalization's remarkable ability to seek out and penetrate new markets. For most of the 20th century, the developed world's inexhaustible consumption habits have fueled the multinational business of extractives, all the while wreaking havoc on largely rural, Afro-Colombian communities. These communities are left to deal with forcible displacement, pollution and dispossession from traditional lands.

I just returned from a weeklong trip to La Guajira, a department in Colombia located in the northeastern region of the country on the Caribbean coast. La Guajira is home to the world's largest open-pit coal mine, El Cerrejón. El Cerrejón was constructed in 1981 as a joint venture by the Colombian state and Mobile, it is currently owned by three international mining firms: BHP Billiton, Anglo-American PLC and Xstrata PLC. In 2010, El Cerrejón produced 76 million metric tons of coal, and exported 99% of it for consumption in the United States and Europe. In the 32 years that El Cerrejón has been operational in La Guajira, the local population mainly composed of Afro-Colombian, indigenous and campesinos, has been embroiled in a struggle against forcible displacement, human rights violations by paramilitary actors, and pollution of natural resources. El Cerrejón worked in conjunction with the Colombian government to forcibly displace and seize collective land holdings from Afro-Colombian communities. Most infamously was the Afro-Colombian village of Tabaco, whose land was expropriated and village demolished on the 9th of August 2001 for the expansion of mining operations. Most of the former residents of Tabaco took refuge in the neighboring village of Albania, or made their way to cities solidifying their fate as urban drift, adding to Colombia's strikingly high percentage of internally displaced persons, an overwhelming percentage being Afro-Colombian.

Yet, in the face of a globalized economy that often has the most violent effects on rural, politically marginal communities, the spontaneous mobilization of Afro-Colombians in La Guajira is something to pay attention to. While the organization of diasporic communities began on La Guajira, their vision is anything but local. Communities affected by mining operations are organizing based on common racial antecedents, often using the words "descendientes" referring to descendants of slaves, and "cimarrones" referring to maroon slave communities, in their organization titles. These words reference black identity in Colombia, based in a common history of marginality, displacement and resistance. For the last 10 years, Dr. Aviva Chomsky professor of History at Salem State University has been working in conjunction with Afro-Colombian communities affected by mining operations in La Guajira to craft a transnational solidarity framework around securing socially and environmentally responsible mining practices, greater transparency when dealing with communities and fair and adequate relocation and compensation for communities who have been previously displaced by El Cerrejón. This framework is undergirded by the idea of globalization, the same phenomenon that has rendered so many Afro-Colombians displaced to begin with. The framework works to draw international attention to the various ways irresponsible mining has impacted the lives of those individuals from La Guajira, and to assert public pressure for change. Dr. Chomsky explains, "Multinationals have a product to sell, and

they also have an image to sell. They have to keep their shareholders and their customers happy. One of the main goals of the international solidarity campaign has been to try to bring the voices of the multinationals' victims out into the public sphere. When their voices can be heard, the multinationals lose their monopoly on information and opinion, and when they feel the public relations risk is when they start acknowledging the rights of those that they would rather just ignore, like the communities that have been destroyed and displaced by the mining operations".

Historically, the United States has constructed economic and political relationships with Colombia, giving the U.S. tremendous access to natural resources like coal, gold and lumber, and as a result wealth. Historians cite the construction of Yankee Stadium as possible via the profits gained through gold mining in the Chocó region of Colombia. Yet Afro Colombian communities on La Guajira organizing around a common racial identity with a rich history of resistance are providing a valuable counternarrative to the quality of life made possible in the west via extractive industries in Colombia, and are proving to be formidable opponents for western multinationals.

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