

# Latin America Rejects the Extractive Model in the Streets

by Raúl Zibechi

Monsanto had to halt construction of a seed plant in Córdoba because of widespread opposition from the population. Large extractive companies begin to reap a harvest of defeats.

“Under democracy, it’s the peoples that are the disappeared,” stated Mercedes Maidana, who defines herself as a “nomadic colla” [1] who still works the land despite living in a city in northern Argentina. With that phrase, she established a thread between past dictatorships and current political regimes at the conference “From Extractivism to Re-building Alternatives,” held in Buenos Aires in late August 2013. [2]

At that time, the Neuquén legislature was voting on extending the YPF-Chevron agreement to conduct fracking in the Loma La Lata until 2048. Repression against thousands of protesters in front of the legislature led to the walkout of seven representatives: three radicals, two linked to the CTA, and two leftists, among them Raúl Godoy, leader of the worker-run company Zanón.

Throughout Latin America, people are opposing a model that destroys the environment and limits the possibilities for communities to continue cultivating the land and living the way they choose. Conflicts over mining, fumigations and genetically modified organisms are among the most frequent.

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According to the Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America (OCMAL), there are more than 195 active conflicts due to large-scale mining in the region. Peru and Chile lead the list with 34 and 33 conflicts respectively, followed by Mexico with 28, Argentina with 26, Brazil with 20 and Colombia with 12. Those with the fewest are Trinidad and Tobago, Paraguay, and Uruguay, with one each.

Large mines are affecting a total of 290 communities. In countries like Peru, where 25% of land was conceded to multinational mining companies, unrest toppled two cabinets of President Ollanta Humala’s government and led to the militarization of several provinces. Between 2006 and 2011, socio-environmental struggles caused the death of 195 activists in the Andean country.

Resistance to soybean expansion, the main genetically modified (GM) crop in the region, is widespread in Argentina, where Monsanto wants to install a plant in the town of Malvinas Argentinas (near Córdoba), to produce GM maize seeds. In this city the “Mothers of Ituzaingó” won the first battle against fumigations. Ituzaingó is a working class

neighborhood of six thousand in southern Córdoba, surrounded by soybean fields.

## Mothers without children

Sofia Gatica says her neighborhood “was declared uninhabitable in 2005, even though in 2002 the authorities said that everything was fine. Only in 2008 did the president intervene, ordering an investigation into the impact of the use of agrochemicals.” [3] The founder of Mothers of Ituzaingó gave birth to a daughter 13 years ago. Days after, the baby’s kidneys stopped working. She wanted to know the reasons for the death of her daughter and started talking to neighbors.

Without any experience, about 16 mothers began to go door to door in the neighborhood. They discovered that cancer rates were 41 times the national average. “There are 300 cancer patients, children are born with birth defects, 80% of children have chemicals in their blood, and 33% of deaths are due to tumors,” says Sofia. Water in their tanks was contaminated with pesticides as a result of aerial spraying.

The Mothers of Ituzaingó set the “Stop Spraying” campaign in motion to denounce the situation. In 2008 the Minister of Health ordered an investigation by the Department of Medicine at the University of Buenos Aires. It affirmed the research by the Mothers of Ituzaingó, linking maternal exposure to pesticides with health effects. A subsequent ordinance banned aerial spraying within 2,500 meters of housing.

In 2010 the Supreme Court not only banned fumigation near towns but also inverted things. From that point on, people would not have to prove the damage of spraying—the government

and soy producers would have to prove that the chemicals they use are safe.

Being the third largest exporter of soybeans in the world, Argentina uses 300 million liters of pesticides, including glyphosate and endosulfan, the latter banned in 80 countries including all of those belonging to the European Union, while the United Nations

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believes that it should stop being produced and marketed.

In April 2012, Sofia received the Goldman Prize, one of the most important awards in the world for people who fight for the environment. “We were received by President Obama, and months later we received a letter telling us that he can’t do anything against Monsanto.”

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### **...what we are experiencing is a covert genocide throughout Latin America...**

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In June 2012, they succeeded in bringing those responsible to a criminal trial for the first time in the country. On August 21, the Córdoba Criminal Chamber found one producer and one fumigator guilty of contamination and affecting the health of the population. The sentence was three years of house arrest.

“It was a landmark decision,” said Avila Medardo Vazquez, former assistant Secretary of Health and current member of the Network of Physicians in Fumigated Communities, since it was the first time that justice condemned those who cause pollution and disease. [4] But the very same day, the Minister of Agriculture, Norberto Yahuar, alongside Monsanto executives, presented a new GM soybean: In-victa RR2 Pro.

The objective of the Mothers of Ituzaingó is to get companies like Monsanto to leave the country. “The alternative is in ourselves, because what we are experiencing is a covert genocide throughout Latin America,” says Sofia. The company promises that the new seed will be “a second generation of soybeans.”

### **Mining: Source of conflict and crisis**

Peru and Chile are the countries with the most mining conflicts in Latin America. Jaime Borda from the Muqui Sur Network of Peru cautions that worldwide mineral exploration expenditures have increased tenfold since 2002. He holds up a map showing “how mining companies see Peru,” a country covered with squares that represent mining concessions. [5] In 2002 only 7.5 million hectares had been granted to mining companies, a figure that jumped to almost 26 million in 2012, or 20% of the country’s area.

Some Andean provinces, like Apurímac, have 57% of their area granted to mining companies. Borda maintains that the high rate of unrest recorded in the country is motivated by the fact that “people realized that protest is the only way to get the government to listen to the communities.” He wonders if a new and different relation to mining is possible.

The answer isn’t simple. Large mining companies, such as the recently merged Glencore and Xstrata, monopolize the markets: 70% of the global zinc market, 55% of the global copper market, 45% of the global lead market.

“In democratic terms, the bases of extractive growth have been exhausted. It becomes increasingly aggressive, vertical, authoritarian and deeply centralist growth,” Borda says.

He therefore advocates “greater institutionalization in environmental issues, strengthening decentralization and territorial order,” as it is not clear who plans the growth of the mining sector that is turning the southern region into a mining corridor.

Chilean Lucio Cuenca, of the Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflicts (OLCA), points out that, despite being the largest copper producer in the world, his country renounced regulating the market and prices to the point that “the transnational companies decide where and how fast to operate.” [6] Mining is the main export commodity but comprises less than 1% of employment, 70% of which is precarious due to subcontracting.

In 2010, 25% of Chile’s territory was under exploration or operation. Mining consumes 37% of electricity produced in the country—which will reach 50% in a few years—compared to 28% for industry and 16% for the residential sector. This impels the state to permanently construct new energy sources, which accelerates the displacement of populations and the transfer of agricultural land to other uses.

In parallel, the state is the big loser with mining expansion. In 1990, 75% of mining production was

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concentrated in the state mining company Codelco, a percentage that fell to 28% in 2007 through concessions to private companies. However, contributions to the tax base are reversed: with that small percentage of production, Codelco contributed \$8.3 billion dollars to the treasury in 2008, compared to only \$3.4 billion for private companies that produce twice as much as Codelco.

Opponents of transnational mining have won an important victory in Chile. Since 2000, they protested the mining company Barrick Gold, which operates the Pascua Lama mine on the Chile-Argentina border. The court decided to stop the operation as long as the containment structures and systems to manage polluted water were not in place.

This project of Barrick Gold—the largest gold producer in the world, worth about \$8.5 billion—was paralyzed in April by a local court at the request of indigenous communities in the area. The Supreme Court upheld the suspension of the mine. [7]

Barrick consequently reported losses of \$8.56 million in the second quarter of 2013 (40% of its assets), and shareholders have filed a lawsuit against management for concealing and misrepresenting information since October 2009. It may be the beginning of mining’s problems in Chile: the north of the country is suffering a major water crisis mainly as a result of large-scale mining. [8]

## Us or them

Biologist Raul Montenegro, winner of the Alternative Nobel Prize in 2004, [9] contends that “the current extractive agricultural model practiced in Argentina should be taken as a very widespread, superficial variant of large-scale mining.” [10] He argues that such agricultural production doesn’t extract metals, but nutrients that are then exported as grain. “In addition to the consumption of water, agriculture and large-scale mining have in common the generation of environmental liabilities.”

While mining leaves sterile deposits and mineral trails, industrial agriculture “leaves scattered accumulations of pesticides that persist for years and decades.” With that outlook, he tackles Monsanto’s venture in Malvinas Argentinas, a town 14 kilometers from Córdoba and 10 from Ituzaingó that has just over 12,000 inhabitants. Like all cities situated in soybean fields, it takes in the effects of pesticides. Fortunately, Montenegro explains, the news of Monsanto’s arrival came as society was debating “effects of low doses of pesticides on human health and the environment,” thanks to the persistence of the Mothers of Ituzaingó.

Ironically, President Cristina Fernández announced the news from the US on June 15, 2012, three days after the beginning of the first trial against those responsible for pollution in Ituzaingó. Having just found out about the project, the inhabitants of Malvinas Argentinas set in motion the Assembly of Malvinas Struggle for Life, joined by the Network of Physicians of Fumigated Communities and local residents.

In April, the National University of Córdoba, the Catholic University of Córdoba, and CONICET (National Council of Scientific and Technical Research) publicized a survey conducted in Malvinas Argentinas: 87% want a popular referendum and 58% reject the installation of the multinational company. But 73% are afraid to argue against Monsanto for fear of being harmed, and 65% have no confidence in the environmental impact study that will be conducted by the company itself. [11]

Monsanto plans to install 240 silos of GM corn seed with the objective of reaching 3.5 million hectares sowed. Dr. Avila Vazquez asserts that one of the main risks is a disease called “farmer’s lung,” which results in the formation of fibrosis in the lungs. An additional problem is that “a place where there are so many silos together, where grains will be coated with a film of agrochemicals, doesn’t exist in Latin America.” [12]

The plant will use millions of gallons of agrochemicals for curing seed. A portion of the effluent “will be released in the soil and the water, causing serious damage,” says Avila Vazquez. The agricultural frontier will keep expanding; many insects will die. “These seeds are banned in Europe because they

have led to the mass death of bees, monarch butterflies and ladybugs,” the doctor points out.

Meanwhile, Montenegro argues that “Argentina could have the two largest plants for seed conditioning in the world, which will strengthen the already uncontrolled extractive model.” The assembly holds that the municipality applies a provincial law that has fewer environmental requirements or demands than the national. In April, the Supreme Court enabled operation that had been suspended by another court. [13]

Protests against Monsanto have increased since September 18, 2013, when demonstrators set up a camp preventing the passage of trucks carrying materials for the construction of the plant. There was a strong police repression, in which Sofia Gatica was wounded. “We are not going to allow the entry of any truck, or let Monsanto be installed, because it is us or them. I already lost my daughter,” Sofia says. [14]

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### **While mining leaves mineral trails, industrial agriculture “leaves pesticides that persist for decades.”**

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The construction syndicate (union) cleared protesters from one of the entrance gates on September 26 and is complaining about the lost source of jobs. [15] Despite the nastiness of the business unionism,

protests led to the suspension of work on October 1, 2013 due to lack of construction materials.

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Notes:

1. A *colla* is an indigenous person from the *altiplano*
2. *El seminario “Desde el extractivismo a la re-construcción de alternativas” fue realizado el 29 de agosto en Buenos Aires y estuvo organizado por la asociación BEPE (Bienaventurados los Pobres), la Red Agroforestal del Chaco y la Red de Asistencia Jurídica contra la Megaminería.*
3. *Intervención de Sofia Gatica en el seminario “Desde el extractivismo a la re-construcción de alternativas.”*
4. Darío Aranda, “Invicta, la nueva imposición de Monsanto,” *MU*, Buenos Aires, setiembre 2013.
5. *Intervención de Jaime Borda en el seminario “Desde el extractivismo a la re-construcción de alternativas.”*
6. *Intervención de Lucio Cuenca en el seminario “Desde el extractivismo a la re-construcción de alternativas.”*
7. Reuters, Santiago, 25 de setiembre de 2013.
8. *Datos aportados por Lucio Cuenca.*
9. Right Livelihood Award
10. “Monsanto invade Malvinas Argentinas (Córdoba),” 22 de julio de 2012 en [www.ecoportal.net](http://www.ecoportal.net)
11. Darío Aranda, *Agro y minería*, Página 12, 19 de setiembre de 2013.
12. *Monsanto: la semilla de la discordia*, 6 de octubre de 2013 en <http://noticias-ambientales-cordoba.blogspot.com/>
13. *Monsanto: conflicto social e incertidumbre legal*, *La Voz del Interior*, Córdoba, 6 de octubre de 2013.
14. *Luchan contra la llegada de Monsanto a Córdoba*, 4 de octubre de 2013 en [www.olca.cl](http://www.olca.cl)
15. *Monsanto: conflicto social e incertidumbre legal*, *La Voz del Interior*, Córdoba, 6 de octubre de 2013.