



The Brief

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"Blood coal" part of NB's energy mix

By TRACY GLYNN

NB Power's Belledune plant burns coal extracted from the world's largest open-pit coal mine; the Cerrejón mine in La Guajira, Colombia. Coal extracted from Cerrejón is exclusively exported to meet the energy demands of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Massachusetts and other areas.

Coal from Colombia has been dubbed "Colombian blood coal" because of violent displacement of communities and assassinations of union leaders at the country's coal mines.

Since the development of Cerrejón in 1982, indigenous Wayuu and Afro-Colombian communities in La Guajira have been forcibly displaced from their lands. Traditional agriculture-based livelihoods have been destroyed by dispossession of the land and industrial contamination. During the violent displacement of the Tabaco community, several people sustained serious injuries after being attacked by police. Other communities including Tamaquito face similar fates with planned expansion of the mine.

Community representatives, Colombian trade unionists, and international solidarity activists regularly attend annual shareholders' meetings of the mine's owners: BHP Billiton (UK/Australia), Xstrata (Switzerland) and Anglo American (UK).

On a 2006 delegation to the affected communities, Jairo Quiroz, a union leader said, "Their fundamental rights have been violated. These communities lack the most minimal conditions necessary for a decent life. They seem to belong to the living dead."

Debbie Kelly, an RCMP forensics officer from Halifax, NS, who participated in the same delegation, reported, "Some only eat every three days and for the smiling little children, it is hard to take. Even though their little bodies are racked in open sores from contaminated water, they don't cry."

Despite knowledge of Colombia's deplorable human rights track record and resistance from Canadian and Colombian social movements, Canada ratified a free trade agreement with Colombia in June. Free trade critics say the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (CCFTA),



Left to right: Daniel Légère, President of CUPE NB, Jesus Brochero, representative with SINTRACARBON and Michel Boudreau, President of the NB Federation of Labour, met in Moncton in December 2008. Photo by Tracy Glynn.

like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), serves the interests of capital. They describe free trade agreements (FTAs) as a mechanism that allows soaring profits and reduced labour costs through the super-exploitation of workers in economically and politically oppressed areas. Labour unions, human rights organizations and church groups across Canada have decried 45 assassinations of trade unionists in Colombia in 2009 as reason enough to oppose the deal.

There have been active campaigns in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and the U.S. to educate the public about the human price of their coal consumption. The campaigners demand that electricity-generating companies, like NB Power, buying coal from Cerrejón put pressure on the company to negotiate fair agreements with communities affected by the mine's operations.

Jesus Brochero, a union leader with SINTRACARBON, the union representing 3,500 direct employed workers at Cerrejón, was the most recent visitor to the Maritimes. He spoke to crowds in Fredericton and Tatamagouche, NS, and met with New Brunswick's union leaders in Moncton in early December 2008. He also met with NB Power executives to discuss the situation of workers at the mine and to ask for NB Power's support in their demands for safe and healthy working conditions. The workers are concerned about prolonged exposure to carcinogenic substances and they want the

company to categorize the substances they encounter at work as hazardous.

Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world for people active in trade unions; over 2,510 trade union leaders have been murdered in the last ten years. On March 22, 2008, Adolfo González Montes, a worker at Cerrejón and union leader, was tortured and killed at his home. He is survived by his wife and four small children. The Colombian government's failure to act on such crimes allows the perpetrators to kill trade unionists with impunity.

Besides continuing the struggle for better pay and safer working conditions, Sintracarbón has been fighting to organize many of the 4,000 outsourced workers at the mine. On August 9, 2010, four outsourced maintenance workers at Cerrejón were killed when a high platform holding 16 workers collapsed and fell. Organizing efforts are countered with harassment and persecution by contractors, while the company refuses to intervene.

The Fredericton Peace Coalition, Atlantic Regional Solidarity Network, Development and Peace,

New Democratic Party and social justice groups are monitoring the situation in Colombia and acting in solidarity with the mine affected communities and the workers. In recent years, they have asked NB Power to develop a detailed human rights policy in their business dealings and to ensure compliance with this policy through an independent third party. NB Power has been asked to ensure that their purchases, operations or investments do not directly or indirectly cause human rights abuses. They have been asked to include International Labour Organization standards concerning the rights of indigenous peoples and the safety of trade unionists in their policy.

NB Power, a provincial Crown corporation with a mandate to serve the public interest, has acted on requests to write letters to Cerrejón asking for fair dealings with the affected communities and their workers. In contrast, NS Power, now a private company owned by Emera, has refused to continue meeting with Nova Scotians concerned about the human rights violations at the areas where they purchase their coal. While NB Power has been open to meet with New Brunswickers concerned about the use of Colombian coal, they have yet to respond to the requests concerning the ethics of their operations.

Wages and welfare lagging behind food prices

By ALEX COREY

A survey of food prices conducted by the Common Front for Social Justice in July and August showed that food prices have risen sharply in the last four years. Their survey confirms what working people already know from experience. Of 49 foods surveyed, 42 of them are more expensive than they were four years ago. Whole wheat bread and canned tuna doubled in price. The cost of all-purpose flour rose by 85 per cent.

Food takes up a large chunk of the monthly budget of workers (employed or unemployed). Many bills, such as rent or telephone are inflexible. If workers were to chose to skip paying their rent or mortgage they would lose their home. They can, however, save money by skipping the occasional meal or eat low-nutrition meals, but they do this at the cost of their health. The Common Front's study shows that the share of income spent on food is increasing. This means that it will be increasingly difficult for workers in the low-wage sphere, those on social assistance, and pensioners to purchase the food necessary for their health.

Dr. Thom Workman writes in his 2009 book, *If You're in My Way I'm Walking: The Assault on Working People Since 1970*, "'Real wages' refers to the purchasing capacity of wages when changes in prices are factored in." Workers often refer to this as, "how far their money goes". Workman cites Statistics Canada data that shows that in NB, between 1976 and 2007, the real minimum wage decreased by 22.7 percent and that currently one in four New Brunswick workers earns within \$2.75 of the

legislated minimum wage. A low-wage sphere of work has been expanding.

Workman uses the term Fordism to describe the period between 1945-1970. Fordism is named after Henry Ford who introduced the first moving assembly line and the \$5 work day; this arrangement Workman refers to as "mass production for mass consumption". During this period, the capital class (the bosses) and labour (workers) came to a temporary agreement in the terms of the class struggle. Workman writes, "To work was to be ensconced in a mind-numbing job, but there was a good chance that workers could expect their wages to rise modestly from year to year." Capital recognized that it had to save the capitalist system from growing working class movements; it agreed to recognize unions and it conceded to modest wage increases. In exchange, labour stopped challenging capital's place in managing the labour process; it removed from its ranks 'radicals' who wanted the working class to own and manage the productive forces of society.

But the laws of motion of capitalism meant that Fordism was an unstable arrangement. Workman explains that when the rate of profit fell in the 1960s and 1970s, "the begrudging acceptance of rising wages on the part of capital dissipated".

Capital tore up its end of the bargain. A distinct change took place in production practices and in state policy, marking a new era known as neoliberalism (1970-present). Neoliberalism is centered around attacking every institution that helps protect workers' wages. During this era, capital successfully crushed unions, dismantled state enterprises and cut social programs. Capital became increasingly mobile, moving production to areas of the world where workers are

more oppressed and could be paid lower wages.

Set within this history, the failure of wages and welfare to keep pace with food prices is best understood as a demonstration of the success that the capital class has had in holding down wages in their effort to squeeze more profits out of workers. (continued on page 2)



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