



The Brief

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Topacio Vive! Guatemalan youth fight for the living and their dead

BY TRACY GLYNN



Franklin Valenzuela, a Guatemalan youth activist, on the shores of Prince Edward Island on June 20, 2016. Photo by Lisa Rankin.

Fredericton - When 17-year-old Franklin Valenzuela is not in high school, he is organizing with other youth in a life and death struggle against a Canadian-owned mine in his rural Guatemalan community.

Valenzuela, who dreams of being a lawyer, was in Fredericton and other Canadian and Maritime communities in June to tell Canadians about how mining by Canadian corporations has brought conflict and grief to his homeland.

At every stop from Toronto to Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia, Valenzuela tells the story of how much one youth activist meant to his community and how she was murdered on her way home to Mataquescuintla, a small town southeast of Guatemala City, on April 13, 2014.

Topacio Reynoso Pacheco was 16 years old when she was fatally shot in an attack that also left her father, Alex, in a coma for seven months. The attack was linked to their activism against Tahoe Resources' Escobal silver mine, the world's third largest silver mine. Alex Reynoso survived being shot again in October 2015. The attack that killed Topacio has never been investigated by the authorities. Security now guard the Reynoso family's home.

Valenzuela has a sticker with Topacio's face on it for every audience member. The sticker says, "Rest In Power." He also sells t-shirts with Topacio's colourful drawing of butterflies and mother earth on them and passes around his cell phone to show the audience a picture of a mural made of Topacio's artwork and words. He reads a poem by Topacio's younger brother Edwin, leaving many audience members in tears.

Valenzuela also shares the story of his friend, 18-year-old Luis Fernando Garcia Monroy. Fernando was shot in the face while peacefully protesting outside the mine in 2013. Alberto Rotondo, head of security for the mining company, was arrested for the attack that wounded Fernando and six others but managed to escape custody and flee to his home country of Peru before standing trial. Rotundo was captured in Peru and Guatemala is in the process of trying to extradite him. Meanwhile, in Canada, a civil suit against Tahoe Resources for the shooting incident is ongoing in British Columbia.

After Reynosa was murdered, Valenzuela and Fernando founded an organization of youth to resist the mine. They called the organization, JODVID (Organized Youth in Defense of Life). Valenzuela says the youth are using the arts to creatively resist the Escobal silver mine in their communities.

The Escobal mine is approximately three kilometres from San Rafael las Flores, a town of approximately 3,000 people, and about 70 kilometres from Guatemala City. The mine's owner, Tahoe Resources, is based in Vancouver.

Foreigners came to Valenzuela's community looking for gold and silver but told the community that they were looking for dinosaur fossils, recounted Valenzuela. Later, they gave people \$750 to dig boreholes on their plots of land. Struggling farmers were initially excited about the money, said Valenzuela, but a few years later, silver was being mined through tunnels in a large-scale mining operation that was just five kilometres from their homes and fields.

As the mine developed, so did conflict and resistance from the indigenous Xinca and Ladino communities in the area. Some were in favour of the mine while others were opposed. Farmers became worried about water contamination and shortages. They grow corn, beans, onions, tomatoes and coffee there.

Results of a 2012 plebiscite on the mine in Mataquescuintla revealed strong opposition, with 96 % of voters casting a ballot rejecting the mine. The Constitutional Court of Guatemala then landed another blow to the company and the government when, for the first time in Guatemala's history, the court said that the consultation and plebiscite results were binding and there was an obligation by the State to comply with the results.

Six municipalities surrounding the Escobal mine have also rejected the mine through referenda and opponents of the mine are getting elected including Roberto Pivaral, member of the Committee in Defense of Life and Peace who was an early victim of Tahoe's strategy to criminalize opponents. He won the mayoral race on a pro-referendum platform in San Rafael Las Flores.

For their opposition, residents of Mataquescuintla have endured a state of siege and have been targeted with violent repression, criminalization and stigmatization.

Valenzuela's father, uncle and neighbours have been the subject of bogus charges that were later dropped when it was too obvious there was no evidence. Their homes have been searched and ransacked by the authorities on multiple occasions.

Canadian mining companies in Guatemala have long enjoyed the support of corrupt politicians in Guatemala, including former President Otto Pérez Molina who was indicted on charges of illicit association, customs fraud, and bribery. An international warrant has been issued for the arrest of Erick Archila, the Minister of Energy Mines who granted the mine license to Tahoe Resources. He is facing charges of money laundering and conspiracy. Archila approved Tahoe's exploitation license in 2013 despite 250 individual complaints concerning the project's impact on water and health.

Valenzuela tells Canadian audiences that he has only shared part of the story of his community's struggles against Canadian mining.

The youth organizer joins many other Guatemalan activists who have visited Fredericton and other communities across Canada in just over a decade. Crisanta Perez spoke of the criminalization that she has suffered for resisting the Goldcorp mine in San Marcos highlands last summer. Before Perez, Javier De Leon, a community organizer, and Juan Tema, a farmer from Sipakapa, spoke of their community's resistance to Goldcorp. Angelica Choc has made several trips to Canada, including to Rexton and Elsipogtog, site of a violent break up of a camp against shale gas in 2013, to share the story of how her husband, Adolfo Ich, an opponent of the HudBay nickel mine, was murdered by the company's security guards.

The speaking tours have been organized by the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network. Breaking the Silence has been supporting communities in Guatemala affected by on Canadian mining companies since 2004.

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Imagining an urban Fredericton

BY MATTHEW HAYES

Now that the dust has settled on the recent municipal elections, and Fredericton has a new mayor, we can focus a bit on what future vision our city needs.

Mike O'Brien and his council have set about the task with a new project, Imagine Fredericton.

Imagining how our city is changing also requires reckoning with how the world is changing, and how the business models of large urban and suburban landowners have run their course (the Irving family are Fredericton's largest, but there are other families with sizeable holdings). In light of social, cultural and economic changes—to say nothing of climate change—these business models need revision, and the city needs to play a role in the transition.

Like other parts of New Brunswick, Fredericton faces significant challenges. A declining birthrate, out-migration and lack of immigration make our economic problems even larger. Unemployment in the province remains stubbornly high, three percentage points higher than the national average of 6.9% in May, and youth unemployment is the highest in Canada.

Moreover, our economic woes are compounded by a lack of economic diversification and planning for urban neighbourhoods.

Both main provincial political parties seem stuck catering to the business interests who have benefited from lower tax rates and cheap land prices on the outskirts of our three major cities, thus undermining forces that might have helped create metropolitan areas over the last 30 years.

Moreover, in Fredericton, much of the last thirty years has been wasted catering to landowners at the city's edges. One of the main strategies of wealth accumulation for rich New Brunswick families has been to blow cities outward through municipally-sanctioned suburban sprawl. This has been at the cost of more complete communities and denser and more efficient developments closer to neighbourhood services and historic centres.

In addition to playing money-games at the edges of our cities, our province's most powerful families seem unanimous that job creation will come by doubling down on old industries. Debates about jobs seem to focus especially on oil and gas projects like the Energy East pipeline and fracking, or one of the world's largest open-pit tungsten mines.

Boosters say these projects will generate jobs. No doubt, they will. But they will not fix our bigger problems. The jobs they might create are few and almost all temporary jobs. Moreover, they will create fewer jobs than their new economy and new energy alternatives.

The skills needed for new economy jobs are often different than those in the oil patch. And since Northern Alberta oil will have to stay in the soil for Canada to meet its climate change commitments, many of the workers who can currently rely on jobs in Alberta need new opportunities in new industries – and therefore, they also need education and training opportunities that our universities and community colleges can provide.

We need a new urban vision, one that recognizes that urban areas are creative spaces that draw people to them. In an age of exploding real estate costs in global cities, small cities in New Brunswick can attract new industries if they can offer the type of urbanism that more and more people in Canada want to enjoy.

Matthew Hayes is a professor of sociology at St. Thomas University and a former mayoral candidate. His 2012 campaign focused on ideas for Fredericton's future.



The launch of Imagine Fredericton drew approximately 150 people who were keen to share their ideas for Fredericton's future. Photo by Tracy Glynn.

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Topacio Vive!

Lisa Rankin, a coordinator with Breaking the Silence, reminded the Fredericton audience that the violence of Guatemala’s 30-year old civil war did not really end but rather took on a different form and Canadian mining companies are implicated in that violence.

Similar to Guatemala in 1968 when Mama Maquín was slain with 51 other Maya Q’eqchi peasants in the Panzós Square while rallying against a Canadian-owned nickel mining operation, bullets continue to be deployed on opponents against various forms of resource extraction, sometimes killing them. Revived efforts to mine nickel in eastern Guatemala were linked to rapes and murder committed in 2007, charges Maya Q’eqchi women and men are presently bringing to court in Canada in one of several historic lawsuits that involve a Canadian company going to trial for the actions of its subsidiary abroad.

The nature and extent of capitalist resource exploration and extraction seen today in Guatemala and other Latin American countries is referred to as extractivism and the fight against it is considered a life and death struggle for indigenous and rural communities that need healthy lands and ecosystems to grow food.

Marlon García, an artist who worked in Guatemala City’s archives collecting evidence of massacres, visited Fredericton and other Canadian communities in 2007 to exhibit his paintings of the Panzós Massacre. Valenzuela and the youth of his organization share García’s determination to never forget those who died defending their communities by memorializing them through their paintings, poetry and performances. Their political art makes them an enemy to the powerful.

Ben McLaughlin, a student entering Grade 12 at Ecole Ste-Anne in Fredericton, met Valenzuela at the St. Mary’s First Nation Powwow on June 19: “It was great to see what other youth activists from around the world are doing. There was an exchange of knowledge and ideas which will be really useful. Franklin’s group wants to start talking about sexism and gender, and I’ve done a lot of work with that. Franklin has done a lot of work on the environment. He gave me new ideas and tricks for how I can better myself as an environmental activist. It was amazing.”



Franklin Valenzuela and Jeremias Tecú (left to right) take part in a social media campaign that is collecting messages of support for the youth organization, JODVID, in Fredericton on June 19, 2016. Photo by Lisa Rankin.

“It gives me hope when I see youth organizing,” said Jeremias Tecú, a member of Breaking the Silence and a refugee from Guatemala who works with young newcomers as a settlement worker in Fredericton.

Tracy Glynn is a member of the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network.

Authors call for needs-based, democratic alternatives to the capitalist state

BY BRUCE WARK

Two Canadian political science professors contend there is a desperate need to find alternatives to the capitalist economic system. In their new book, *The Servant State: Overseeing Capital Accumulation in Canada*, Geoffrey McCormack and Thom Workman write that the “grotesque inequities of the capitalist system feed hatred, nourish misogyny, promote chronic dispossession and wreak havoc on the environment.”

“In the best of times, capitalism tends to produce unemployment, it tends to produce poverty, it tends to produce war, environmental degradation and alienating conditions for workers,” says McCormack, an assistant professor at Wheelock College in Boston.

“We tend to be a little more insulated...in the Canadian context,” adds Workman, a political science professor at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. “But when we open our horizons up to the globe, to humanity writ large, we see grotesque exploitation and misery imposed on far too many people.”

As its title suggests, their book argues that governments in capitalist states primarily serve the interests of the capitalist business class, not the majority of citizens.

“The idea of a servant state and the subtitle ‘overseeing capital accumulation in Canada’ draws out emphatically this underlying theme that the state is not really a democratic state in a meaningful sense of the word democracy,” Workman says pointing, for example, to what he and McCormack call the coercive character of capitalism.

“People will colloquially say all the time, ‘you must work to pay the rent,’” Workman says. “The state ensures through its policies that you don’t forget that.”

He adds, for example, that unemployment insurance benefits are always short-term forcing workers to take jobs when their payments run out even if those jobs are insecure and poorly paid.

McCormack acknowledges that the Canadian state provided more generous social benefits in the so-called golden age of capitalism after the Second World War when business profits were growing and unions had more power.

“It [the golden age] was premised upon a period of relatively strong growth and stability coupled with a working-class movement that pressured the state to make it possible,” he says. “Today we don’t have a working-class movement in Canada and the underlying conditions of capital accumulation that made that period possible, have also eroded.”

McCormack predicts the golden age will never return partly because capitalism is prone to recurring periods of crisis as profits inevitably stagnate or decline.

“When there are periods of renewed growth, they tend to come at the expense of working people,” he says. “It means longer working hours, it means lower real wages, it means a more intense work life, it means higher productivity, it means more coercion at the workplace, it means a higher degree of supervision, it means more stress, more alienation. It also comes at the expense of massive unemployment, restructuring and moving people around.”

The Servant State argues that the social benefits of the post-war period came at a high political price as the left in Canada moved away from its initial opposition to capitalism in the 1930s; the state waged repression in the name of anti-communism and labour unions purged their more radical members.

“In order to secure those gains, we had to shelve the idea of any kind of radical or socialist agenda,” Workman says. “Left-wing politics was reduced to policy considerations which is fine until another crisis comes along and then, all we are doing is reacting to policy issues and policy matters and the left is absolutely ill equipped to deal with the more

Community Calendar

To list your community event, email info@nbmediacoop.org. For an updated listing of events, check nbmediacoop.org.

Feminist Dance Party on the Patio. July 16 at 8 pm to 1 am. Grad House, 676 Windsor St., Fredericton. Join us for a dance party on the patio with your feminist friends. In case of rain, we’ll be inside. Organized by members of Reproductive Justice NB. Admission by donation to cover event fees. Contact: reproductivejusticenb@gmail.com.

In Brief

Covered Bridge Potato Chip workers win first contract. Covered Bridge Potato Chip workers in Wakefield, New Brunswick won a first contract on May 24, ending a five-month strike and national boycott of the company’s chips. The workers have waited two years for a fair first contract. The three-year agreement includes seniority provisions, job protection language and wage and benefit gains. “This is a tremendous victory for the members, who were absolutely courageous and determined in their campaign for fairness,” says Dan Smith, president of UFCW Canada Local 1288P. “Through thick and thin and through one of the most frigid winters ever, they never lost faith and were ready to hold the line for as long as it took to get a fair first contract.”

NB to fund gender-confirming surgeries. The government of New Brunswick announced that they plan to implement Medicare coverage for gender-confirming surgeries and remove restrictions on changing identification documents on June 13. New Brunswick joins every other province in Canada in extending coverage for the surgery. In response to the announcement, TransAction NB, an advocacy group for trans health care, stated: “Being able to access gender-confirming surgery and appropriate identification documents will markedly improve the lives of NB’s trans residents for a number of reasons. Trans people are a seriously disadvantaged minority group; we have a high likelihood of experiencing violence, abuse, and ignorance in our day-to-day lives, and we face high levels of discrimination that prevent us from accessing adequate housing, employment, education, healthcare, and social services.”



Thom Workman and Geoffrey McCormack, authors of *The Servant State: Overseeing Capitalist Accumulation in Canada*. Photo by Bruce Wark.

profound problems that capitalism naturally engenders.”

McCormack and Workman warn it’s a mistake for the left to think it could capture the capitalist state and use it to improve conditions for poor people or the working class.

“What our book does is to cut through these two ideas,” McCormack says. “It cuts through the idea that the state is somehow neutral and that it’s something that simply can be captured and then, put to good use, and it also cuts through the idea that capitalism can sustain periods of prosperity for working-class people, and it can’t.”

The authors argue that to move beyond capitalism, it would be necessary to establish a democratically planned economic system based on needs, not profits.

As examples, Workman points to the Mondragon federation of workers’ co-operatives in the Basque region of Spain, the Oaxaca Commune in Mexico or the Brazilian back-to-the-land movement.

“We see many different examples...of economies that are really starting to drift towards, or becoming wholly centred around, the production of things for people’s needs as opposed to profits for a select few,” Workman says.

McCormack adds that such a needs-based system would avoid the recurrent crises of capitalism. He calls capitalism the first social system in the world in which abundant goods and resources are periodically wasted.

“We’re effectively talking about a society in which everyday people control their own destiny, control their own lives politically and economically,” he concludes.

Bruce Wark worked in broadcasting and journalism education for more than 35 years. He was a senior editor with CBC Radio for nearly 20 years. He currently resides in Sackville where he publishes Warktimes.

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