From Colombia to New Brunswick: What does a just energy transition look like for where “blood coal” is extracted and burned?

By CORTNEY MACDONNELL

The New Brunswick Environmental Network organized a tour of the NB Power coal plant in Belledune in 2019.

The coal plant burns coal from Colombia. Photo by Tracy Glynn.

With New Brunswick planning to close its Belledune coal plant in 2030 as part of Canada’s transition off coal, advocates for a just energy transition point to the need to include workers and communities in future economic planning. They say that includes the people in the southern New Brunswick region, as in Colombia where NB Power has been sourcing coal from the Cerrejón coal mine since 1993, when the plant opened.

Alvaro Ipuana is an Indigenous Wayuu leader from Nuevo Espinal, one of several communities forcibly displaced for the Cerrejón coal mine in Colombia’s La Guajira region. Ipuana traveled to London, UK, in 2019 to denounce — at an annual shareholders’ meeting — how one of the multinational owners of the coal mine, BHP, treats his community.

Latin America’s largest coal mine, in operation since 1985, the Cerrejón mine is owned by a consortium of three of the largest mining multinational plants in the world: BHP, Glencore and Anglo American. The mine has forcibly displaced Indigenous Wayuu and Afro-Colombian communities from their land.

“We want to make it known that the minerals that leave our territory are stained with our blood,” Ipuana told audiences in London.

Fourteen years ago, José Julio Pérez, an Afro-Colombian man whose ancestors came to La Guajira as slaves from Africa, told a Fredericton audience that, in 2001, approximately 500 soldiers and 200 police officers forcibly evicted him and the residents of his community of Tabaco for a mine that supplies NB Power with coal.

In 2018, Colombia had 7.7 million people internally displaced persons, the highest in the world. While the civil war in Colombia is blamed for forced displacement and migration, mining is another cause.

Since the opening of the Cerrejón coal mine, 19 rivers have disappeared in the semi-desert region of La Guajira, driving a significant humanitarian crisis where child death rates have soared.

Javier Rojas, leader of the Indigenous organisation Wayuu Shipa, told The Bogota Post in 2016: “We estimate that in less than ten years, more than 14,000 members of our communities — children, adolescents, expectant mothers and the elderly — have died due to malnutrition.”

Rojas, whose activism has led to death threats, blames Cerrejón’s operations for drastically reducing the availability of potable water in the region.

COVID-19 has only intensified the drinking water crisis in La Guajira.

Earlier this year, anthropologist Emma Bankis described the conditions in La Guajira: “Communities living near the Cerrejón open pit coal mine have precarious access to water. Mining companies have displaced communities and seized water sources for over thirty years. Thousands of families have to buy potable water, which is already becoming harder to find as people stockpile to prepare for COVID-19.”

In 2018, the Supreme Court of Colombia ordered the country to take all appropriate and necessary measures to ensure that children and adolescents of the Wayuu Indigenous community have access to clear drinking water, food, health care, and housing. The order came after a 2015 decision of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights that called on the Colombian state to take action to prevent further deaths of Wayuu children.

Arnulphi Roy, anti-globalization critic and celebrated author, in her popular essay “The Pandemic is a Portal,” writes that the world has a choice: “We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

Catalina Caro Galvis with CENSAT Agua Viva (Friends of the Earth Colombia) is one activist based in Colombia’s capital of Bogotá that is “imagining a world anew” in Roy’s words. Caro, like activists around the world, works with trade unions, Indigenous communities and international solidarity networks in support of a just transition to a post-carbon, post-extracted society.

Caro’s organization wants the debate on climate change to not just focus on greenhouse gas emissions. According to Caro, the entire fossil-based energy model needs addressing.

The 2019 UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s report, “Climate Change and Land,” agrees and states that it is not just the energy model that needs an overhaul to stop climate change from severely altering the earth’s systems but also the way we produce food.

In New Brunswick, activists in solidarity with Colombia have educated NB Power and the public about Colombian coal since José Julio Perez visited the Maritimes in 2006. They say that it is important to support the demands of the affected communities and workers at the mine.

Francisco Ramirez Cuellar was the latest speaker from Colombia to visit the Maritimes and speak to audiences about the workers.

In 2015, the Colombian union leader, lawyer and survivor of eight known assassination attempts publicly spoke in Fredericton about the murders, violence and poverty linked to the multinational mining companies in his country. Ramirez explained that New Brunswickers must acknowledge and act on the “blood coal” left to NB Power.

Colombian coal is called “blood coal” not only because of the violence exerted on displaced communities but also because of the miners and union activists who have lost their lives due to their harsh and unsafe working conditions and activism.

In a recent interview with the NB Media Co-op, Ramirez said he wants Canadians to remember that Colombia played a role in rewriting Colombia’s mining code which he says resulted in Cerrejón paying a paltry amount in taxes back to Colombia.

“Workers receive an income seven times lower than the... continues on page 2
Campaign start-up plans to mine seabed to stop climate change
By COURTNEY MACDONNEL

Carbon-intensive transportation and the need to transition to a zero-carbon economy has led climate activists to call for a transition to electric vehicles that run on rechargeable batteries instead of gas but marine scientists and conservationists say that mining metals for the batteries is putting ocean life at risk.

According to the start-up company’s website, “they are scientists, environmentalists, engineers and entrepreneurs who see the value in depositing the massive needs of nine billion people as the biggest challenges of our time.”

DeepGreen has exploration contracts to explore metals in the Pacific, with results in ocean waters off the coast of the Pacific Islands. They say they expect to start deep sea mining by 2022.

DeepGreen is the国际Seabed Authority (ISA) to rapidly finalize regulations so the company can mine the deep sea.

Catherine Coumans of Miningwatch Canada is one of many who are concerned about the impact of seabed mining on the marine environment.

“Plans to mine the deep sea show every hallmark of the environmental disasters industrial mining has created on land, including destroying ecosystems, and a failure to deliver benefits to local communities and vulnerable developing countries,” said Coumans.

DeepGreen’s CEO, Gerard Barron told RNZ that sea-bed mining is an exciting new venture for addressing climate change while benefiting the Pacific countries. “It will make jobs for them, it will mean having clean energy and it will mean jobs on their island.”

However, a report released in May refutes DeepGreen’s claims. On May 19, the Deep Sea Mining Campaign in collaboration with the Environmental Justice Commission released a report titled “extracting deep sea nodules”. The report analysed more than 250 peer-reviewed scientific articles and found that mining deep sea nodules would cause irrevocable damage to the Pacific Ocean.

The report also notes that the nodules sitting on the seafloor are a valuable metal.

The report calls for a moratorium on deep sea mining as it is one of the most exciting new initiatives that could have a meaningful impact on addressing climate change, and that’s good for the Pacific,“ added Coumans.

The report notes that Pacific islands have experienced decades of mining and yet their economies are not yet developed.

The report concludes that “the removal of the metals from the deep sea will have a positive environmental impact, and could be a catalyst for change in the Pacific.”

Cortney MacDonnell is an environmental action reporter with RAVEN (Rural Action and Voices for the Environment), a research project based at the University of New Brunswick.

What can the lockdown teach us about reducing carbon emissions?

Despite the economic shutdown that has put millions of jobs at risk, there are some positives in the past few months. As the coal mining companies recognize that the end of coal is near, activists at CENSAT in Colombia are dreaming of a deep sea mining project that could help transform the lives of millions of people. According to international human and environmental rights organisation, Global Witness, Colombia is opposed by locals and is the subject of legal proceedings. Removed from the Toronto Stock Exchange as part of its bankruptcy proceedings, Nautilus Minerals filed for bankruptcy in 2019. Nautilus’ plan to mine the International Seabed is opposed by locals and is the subject of legal proceedings.

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Gerard Barron, CEO and Chairman of DeepGreen Metals, told Radio New Zealand International that the country of Nauru at this annual session of the International Seabed Authority, the International Seabed Authority, representing 167 member states, endorsed a recommendation under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to organize, regulate and control all mineral-related activities in the international seabed.

warned, “Under the cover of COVID-19 the regulations could be pushed through despite the absence of meaningful public debate.”

DeepGreen promotes deep sea mining as creating great wealth with minimal or no adverse impacts. The science does not support their claims. In fact, the best available research clearly indicates that the mining of deep sea nodules will place Pacific island states at great risk. The stakes are extremely high with Pacific economies, cultures, livelihoods, fisheries, food security, tourism, and iconic marine species all under threat from seabed nodules mining added Rosenbaum.

DeepGreen’s partnership with Tonga, Kiribati, and Nauru is potentially a catalyst for conflict with the push from Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea for a moratorium, and Pacific civil society’s vocal opposition to an industry that would destroy their countries Pacific way of life.

Courans, of MiningWatch Canada added, “the report’s case study of the failed Nautilus Minerals deep sea mining project attests to the harsh realities of thinly capitalized operators, and contracts that protect corporate interests over that of governments. The project left the government of Papua New Guinea with a debt of $125 million US.”

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With files from MiningWatch Canada and Tracy Ginny.