

Colombia

Action on



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Bishop Thomas Gumbleton and Brittany Lambert observe and discuss the process to obtain gold

Colombia: where the 1% reign with impunity

*By David Newby, President, Wisconsin Fair Trade Coalition
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Ever been to Marmato, Colombia? Ever heard of Marmato (except in the CSN Newsletter)? Unlikely. Marmato is a small mining town built on the side of El Burro mountain in the lush and beautiful foothills of the Andes northwest of Bogota.

While obscure to us, it is widely known in Colombia. El Burro contains incredibly rich gold deposits (estimated at 10 million ounces—check the current price of an ounce of gold in your paper today). Artisanal miners have worked small family-owned mines there for some 500 years, since before the Spanish conquest. It has great historical significance, too: Simon Bolivar mortgaged it to the English in order to finance the war of independence against Spain—a war which won independence for Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia in the early 19th century.

Colombia: where the 1% reigns with impunity

For hundreds of years, Marmatenos have lived in peace, with work—albeit hard work—for all, and a reasonable standard of living.

Now, all that is threatened.

About five years ago, a Canadian multinational mining corporation, Medoro Resources, which later merged with and into Gran Colombia Gold, began to move into the Marmato area. Gran Colombia Gold, with extensive mining operations in Colombia, had grand plans for Mamato's future: raze the town and gradually destroy El Burro and replace it with an open pit mine.

Through various legal (and illegal) maneuvers, and with the collaboration of high officials in the Colombian government, they began buying land and buying individual mines from the local owners through deceptive practices and promises.

Violence has not been absent either. In late August 2011, the local priest, Father Jose Reinol Restrepo, said in a video soon posted on YouTube that the only way his church would be moved and an open pit mine dug in Marmato would be if he were dead.

Four days later he was murdered.

Those who killed him have not been found. No evidence has been produced to connect Gran Colombia Gold to Father Restrepo's murder, but his assassination has made the local population nervous.

Still, the miners and people of Marmato have not been passive in the face of veiled threats from unknown quarters and Gran Colombia's developing plan to destroy their town

with an open pit mine. The miners formed the Asociacion de Mineros Tradicionales de Marmato, and the populace as a whole formed the Comité Civico pro defensa de Marmato. They reached out to student and other groups at the university in the provincial capital of Manizales who helped organize demonstrations to block Gran Colombia's actions. They also asked the Colombia Support Network to send a delegation of both Americans and Canadians to come to Marmato to investigate—and by doing so, shine a powerful international light on the threat to the people of Marmato and to their heritage.

Our Delegation was in Colombia from January 14-22. It was led by Jack Laun, President of CSN, and also included Bishop Thomas Gumbleton (retired) of Detroit; Brittany Lambert, coordinator of the Americas Policy Group at the Canadian Council for International Cooperation; Paul Webster, a freelance journalist based in Toronto; and myself.

While there, we talked to miners, government officials at the local, provincial and national levels, as well as managers of Gran Colombia who were in charge of the project in Marmato. We also talked to the President of the corporation and other top officials in Bogota (who assured us that all was fine and Gran Colombia had nothing but the best of intentions).

Most moving was a mass meeting with the miners of Marmato on January 17. The meeting was held in the second floor of the local disco dance hall in

the early afternoon. In the morning, you could see miners in the distance up the mountain coming in and out of their mines, while others worked in the small processing mills. But after lunch, they set down their tools and began to stream to the meeting hall. By the time we started, at least 500 packed the hall.

At first, it was obvious that they were skeptical that anything could be done to save their mines and their community. The new Mayor of Marmato stated that he would follow the wishes of the community: he said that it was clear that the multi-national corporations had taken advantage of the local people, but the community as a whole must decide the issue of whether or not there would be an open pit mine in Marmato. Surprisingly, the police commander was more decisive: he declared his opposition to an open pit mine.

Cheers greeted the representative of the Governor of Caldas Province who announced the complete opposition of the Governor to open pit mining in all of Colombia. The courageous national president of the miners union, Francisco Ramirez (who has survived seven assassination attempts by right wing paramilitary death squads), declared solidarity from miners elsewhere in Colombia. He acknowledged the difficulty of the struggle, but also the need for solidarity. He stressed the importance of international support, especially from the AFL-CIO and unions in the United States.

The leaders of the Indigenous Community and the Miners

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Action On Colombia is the official newsletter of the Colombia Support Network, a national peace and justice network of groups and individuals working to promote respect for human rights in Colombia and a just relationship between the United States and Colombia through grass-roots activism.

CSN supports a nonviolent, negotiated resolution to the conflict in Colombia.

CSN is the only current project of Wisconsin Interfaith Committee on Latin America

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Association also spoke, as did members of our Delegation. We got huge applause and cheers when we promised to take their story back to Canada and the United States and thus attempt to put greater international pressure on Gran Colombia to abandon their plans to destroy Marmato.

While the miners seemed skeptical when they first arrived at the meeting, so many expressions of support seemed to turn that skepticism to hope and determination. It is clear that they will continue their struggle no matter the cost (which might include their own lives) to protect their town, their jobs, their families, and their way of life.

And our Delegation visit may already have had some positive results: CSN recently received word that Gran Colombia has promised to have good-faith meetings with both the Indigenous Community and the miners. Are they serious? Time will tell.

We have an enormous responsibility to support our brothers and sisters in Marmato. Supporting them is a small step toward stopping the rape of the planet's resources by multinational corporations for the benefit only of the 1%, whether that 1% be rich stockholders and CEO's in the United States and Canada, or the wealthy oligarchy that controls Colombia.



What is happiness?

An Unforgettable Experience

By Brice O'Connell

In my brief time with Colombia Support Network I have experienced and learned far more than I could ever have expected. Above all else, the delegation I participated in this past January has had the strongest and longest lasting impact on me. This is largely due to the honestly, truly happy people inhabiting Dane County's sister community, our beloved San Jose de Apartadó, despite all odds.

Before taking the rugged, yet apparently improved, unpaved road past miles of banana plantations to the community, I already had a few pieces of information to feed my expectations. I knew it to be a rural, made from scratch and rough-around-the-edges kind of community. I knew to expect the small population of people in jeopardy of losing everything at any moment. I knew many of these people had, in fact, lost just about everything at some point in recent history and continue, even today, to receive threats against their humble existence.

The smiling, hopeful and relaxed faces that greeted our arrival took me

wholly by surprise. It was a quiet arrival, with many of the community members already working or otherwise occupied. Each person we walked past greeted us with a calm wave or a simple "hola." There was a strong feeling of trust and respect before we even knew each other's names. Before long, we offered to help them prepare the cocoa bean harvest by running the beans over metal grates by hand to weed out the small and over-dried ones. Our presence, however foreign, posed no interruption to daily activity whatsoever and they had absolutely no qualms putting us to work for as long as we could handle.

We then set off to briefly admire their community before our meeting with the leaders commenced. Nestled amongst fantastically beautiful hills and mountains covered with lush trees and colorful flora, San Josecito radiates with a natural richness. The friendly, cheerful residents were happy to tell us how proud they were of their surroundings and had no lack of appreciation for the bountiful naturaleza of their valley. After easily falling for a trick by a couple of children hiding in the trees,

An Unforgettable Experience continued

we had to make our way back to the main pavilion for the main purpose of our visit.

Representatives from the vast reaches of San Josecito sat in a circle with our group of five from Colombia Support Network. We learned that some of them had walked more than eight hours to be with us, making our complaints of the comparatively luxurious trip from the United States send a pang of guilt through my stomach. They told us of tragedies they have lived through and of the difficulties they face on a daily basis. How they live despite the unjust practices of their government and the many brutal armed forces just over the hills surrounding their homes and children. They are also surprisingly knowledgeable, able and willing to explain the vast intricacies surrounding their complex political situation on the international scale. Even my bachelor's degree in Global Political Economy did not prepare me to explain such intricacies.

Absolutely unable to relate, we were burning with curiosity. Not to know how do they make it through each day having to face these insurmountable obstacles, but how they continue to live so happily.

"Easy," they told us, "we have each other."

As our conversation progressed, I realized that life with "first world conveniences" tends to produce more stress and anxiety than actual happiness. This community, with only rudimentary indoor plumbing, sparse electricity, and certainly no absurd addictions to Facebook or YouTube, had a much more evident love for life and each other than any group I could think of back in The States. These people aren't forced into an individualistic society; rather they emphasize the values of a community and working together for a common good. Their resources are few and the whole community shares each penny earned from the cocoa bean harvest because each of them had a hand in its production. What this community lacks in money and formal education, they more than make up for in warmth, compassion and lust for life.

The meeting commenced and the local kids soon began begging us to go swim with them in the river. After futile attempts to decline the offer, we eventually caved and joined them in the river running just behind the community. It was an absolute blast diving off the rocks, playing games and teaching them to float on their backs for the first time. Playing in the water and seeing their innocence still intact was an experience I will never forget for the rest of my life.

While slowly drying off during our drive back to the hotel, we came to the realization that we not only should, but also are able, to make a difference in San Josecito with CSN. I cannot begin to fathom anyone wanting to cause harm to this amazing community, let alone the very government that is supposed to protect them. The founding principles of CSN began to take on a new relevance and meaning to the other students and me. We understand now the importance of fair and just foreign policy and that our role as U.S. citizens can truly make all the difference if applied in the proper ways.

If anything, we should fight for the rights of these children, who did not ask for a life under constant threat, for the children with the easy smiles and dirty feet, for the children that just want to go swimming and have a laugh with some friendly college kids from North America. And all of you reading this article can help us in that fight by continuing to support the efforts of this organization by sending urgent actions, staying informed, sending donations or even joining us on our next delegation. Always in solidarity.

THE PEACE COMMUNITY AS I SAW IT

By Steven Pegelow

Despite its title as the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado, the community has never lived in peace. San Jose de Apartado declared itself a peace community fifteen years ago, making it the first and oldest peace community in Colombia. It was the first community to embrace non-violent resistance in a country long characterized by violent resistance. Despite its being a non-violent zone on paper, reality shows a different story.

Throughout its fifteen years of existence, the Peace Community has always been under constant threat. These threats consist of verbal and physical violence, including hundreds of murders, the latest occurring this past month. The actors committing these egregious human rights violations include the FARC guerrillas, paramilitary groups and the Colombian Army. As of late, the threats became more direct and more serious.

Paramilitary members tell the Peace Community they will be displaced and a road will be built through their community. Why will a road be built through this community? The answer lies below the surface of the community and within the foreign affairs of the Colombian government. San Jose de Apartado lies upon vast coal reserves. In stride with the Colombian government's trend of displacing its citizens in favor of multinational corporations, the government intends to give the land to a South Korean mining company to mine the coal reserves. The road will be used to construct the mining operation and to transport coal.

Clearly it is now the role of the international community to place pressure on the Colombian government to prevent this severe threat to the members of San Jose de Apartado.

The community leaders told me they have survived this long by working together. They are a community, not a group of individuals. We must join together with the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado in hopes of achieving true peace for this community.

A View of Colombian Universities and the Students Movement

By *Chelsea Match*

On January 22, 2012, Brice O'Connell, Steven Pegelow, Brittany Lambert, and I walked into a room on the first floor of the Hotel Centro Internacional in Bogotá. We took our seats at a long table across from three unassuming students our age. We all served ourselves coffee, and Leonardo Salcedo began to speak.

Leonardo Salcedo, or Leo, introduced himself as an anthropology student at the National University in Bogotá and as a leader of the student movement in Colombia. Nathaly Granados and Jhon Noriega introduced themselves as private university students and leaders of the same student movement. Leo gave us a brief history of the educational system in Colombia and the ideology behind the student movement.

Similar to the United States, Colombia has both public and private universities. Public universities are subsidized by the state, and private universities are independently funded. The President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, tried to privatize education in Colombia by reforming the existing Law 30 in regards to higher education. The privatization of nearly free public universities would have made tuition impossible to afford for most students. Therefore, the students organized themselves in a movement against Santos' privatization proposition. To oppose this reform, Leo explained that they organize marches, protests, meetings, and more. What was most interesting was the cooperation from a wide variety of students in the movement. Not only public university students, but also private university students and high school students and parents, joined together in opposition

to the Law 30 reform. Not only Colombian students, but Chilean students as well, joined in solidarity to fight for the right to education.

Next, Leo took us on a tour of the public National University in Bogotá where he studies. We walked around campus alongside buildings covered in graffiti denouncing the situation of conflict and political turmoil in Colombia. We sat on some steps and listened to Leo talk about the history of the university and the many protests that ended in police raids, tear gas, and even deaths. Although the National University lacks adequate funding and is a place of constant conflict, there is an overwhelming presence of student struggle, dedication, and leadership there.

The higher education system in Colombia already has its flaws. Leo explained that most university students struggle to pay tuition, and many end up dropping out before getting their degrees due to financial issues. The privatization of education as proposed by President Santos would have exacerbated the issue of the lack of accessibility to a university education. Amazingly, the student movement won. Although met with extreme opposition from the government and police, the students' efforts proved successful, and the reform of Law 30 was shot down.

Meeting with the leaders of the student movement in Colombia was one of my favorite meetings on our delegation. We learned about the similarities and differences between our lives as university students in the United States, and the lives of Leonardo Salcedo, Nathaly Granados, and Jhon Noriega as university students in Colombia. The university students of

Colombia are an inspiration, and our meeting with them made me reflect on the flaws of our own university system. Tuition in the United States has become unaffordable for the majority of students, and it keeps rising every year. Most students have to take out large amounts of loans to finance their university education, which puts them in debt for decades. As students in the United States, we struggle as well to pay for college. The Colombian students should serve as a model for the power that a group of educated young people can have and the change they can make.

The Colombia Support Network

Action on Colombia

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Solidarity with the People

By Oscar Castaño Valencia
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Translated by Eunice Gibson, CSN
volunteer translator

“Solidarity is the tenderness of people”, is what we shout in the marches for life that we often make in Colombia. But that solidarity that transforms realities between the people of developed countries and the multiple realities that different communities experience in Colombia is not very noticeable on the huge agenda of the international cooperation agencies and their governments. They fail to focus on the very real human tragedies that are experienced in Africa, Asia or Latin America. That may be because their interests do not coincide with situations like the little mining town fixed in the Andes Mountains in Caldas Province in Colombia.

Opposing the threatened destruction of a town that is a national heritage site by the Canadian company Gran Colombia Gold became a priority for a delegation of United States and Canadian citizens. It was enormously satisfying to see them walking the

dusty streets of the town of Marmato. Without any doubt, it gave hope to a community where there had been every effort to impose the “mining locomotive” that began with the Uribe administration and is being continued by the Santos government. They care very little, if at all, what happens to the people and the environment if the minerals that exist in the subsoil of this country can be exploited by the multinationals like Anglo Gold, Pacific Rubiales, Medoro and Gran Colombia Gold.

The Bishop, the labor leader, the lawyer and the Cooperative official, accompanied by a journalist, arrived to sense the anxiety of the people of Marmato, to share in their fears but also in their dreams, to listen to their struggles, but above all, to understand their unceasing will not to allow themselves to disappear as a people because of a multinational company.

This delegation listened to the miners of Marmato and of other regions of Colombia. They listened to local and regional governments and to officials of the national government, and they listened to NGO's that work in the

areas of human rights and environment. They listened to the Church and to the managers of the multinational company, to officials of the embassy, and others, to be able to interpret the reality that Colombia and its communities experience and to come closer to the experiences of the people who cannot understand how and why the economic development of countries has to be done by trampling on the most basic rights of their citizens.

In Marmato and in its people remained the hope that they would not be alone in their struggle, that there were people and organizations in the United States and Canada who would be interested in their reality and would share their yearning not to be destroyed as a municipality to make room for open pit mining exploitation.

There have also been some important changes in the manner that the multinational company is treating us. Now we are being respected as authoritative participants and they ask our opinions about the projects that affect us.

There are these two fundamental changes: Empowerment of the residents and changes in the attitude of the multinational company. This has taken place because there was an international delegation to Marmato.

Thanks to the Colombia Support Network that made the delegation possible, and led to these changes that have been taking place in Marmato. Now the legality of the company and the legitimacy of the community are nearer to each other.

But the tenderness of the citizens and the citizens of the developed countries is also nearer. It can transform the realities that the other inhabitants of the world are suffering and confronting every day.



Meeting with Gran Colombia Gold in Marmato. CSN gives special thanks to the United Nations Development Project for accompanying this delegation to Marmato.

Summary of the CSN Delegation to Marmato

By Yamil Amar, President of the Pro-Marmato Civic Committee

On January 15 of this year a Canadian-U.S. delegation composed of CSN President John Laun, Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, and union leader David Newby from the United States and journalist Paul Webster and NGO representative Brittany Lambert from Canada, together with Colombian conflict resolution specialist and translator Beatriz Vejarano, arrived in Marmato. They came for the purpose of learning first-hand about the situation of the miners and of the whole town in general facing the proposal of the multinational mining corporation Gran Colombia Gold to develop an open-pit gold mine. In order to develop the mine, the mining company indicated it would be necessary for it to take possession of the mines, which for centuries, from generation to generation, the residents of the area (“nativos”) have been working. And the mining company has proposed to displace the mine workers, who live very nearby.

The community had the opportunity to explain the difficult situation which, especially since 2006, it has been confronting, for the many tactics which the mining company has used in pursuing its goal. And the delegation was able to learn first-hand, and in the place where events were taking place, what was really happening, without having to rely upon press reports, which because of the economic

power of the mining company, are almost always manipulated.

The members of the delegation made eyewitness visits to several mines, conversed with the miners, and informed themselves in a practical manner of the idiosyncrasies of this town, which is not only rich in subsoil, but which is also rich in culture and history, both within the national context and in the Americas.

The members of the delegation also were able to listen to the community in general, which came together to speak of their worries and learn of the motivation of the delegation's visit.

On Wednesday, January 18 at 9 a.m. a press conference was held in the Hotel Escorial in the city of Manizales. At 11 a.m. the Governor of Caldas, Dr. Guido Echeverri Piedrahita, granted an interview, with the Secretaries of Government and Social Development, the Director of CORPOCALDAS, the commanders of the National Police in Caldas and of the Army also in attendance. The Governor listened attentively to the visitors, and at the end stated that philosophically he was not in favor of open-pit mining, and that in the concrete case of Marmato he was especially opposed to an open-pit mine there, but that he would respect the decision which the community would conscientiously take. At two o'clock in the afternoon on this same day, in Herman Ortiz Parra Hall of the Union of Educators of Caldas EDUCAL, a forum was held with union leaders

of the Department of Caldas. At this meeting the delegation members explained the reason for their visit to Colombia and the solidarity that they were giving to the cause of Marmato and to that of the campesinos of San Jose de Apartado in Antioquia. The satisfaction of the persons in attendance with this praiseworthy work was clear.

On the same day the delegation and I traveled to Bogota to undertake on Thursday morning a marathon-like activity of visits to several governmental and private offices to discuss what the delegation members had learned both in Marmato and in San Jose de Apartado. A delegation led by CSN Program Director Cecilia Zarate-Laun to San Jose de Apartado had joined our Marmato group in Bogota. Among the offices we visited were the following: the Vice Presidency of Colombia, the Ministry of Interior, the Canadian Embassy, CINEP, and Arco Iris. We met with Senator Jorge Enrique Robledo, Representative Ivan Cepeda, Mario Valencia from RECLAME (Movement Against Large Scale Mining), and Polo Democratico Party President Clara Lopez Obregon. We met also with Maria Consuelo Araujo, CEO of Gran Colombia Gold, and other high executives of the company. When we analyzed the results of the delegation, we concluded that it had been very positive and we spoke of a second visit to see the evolution of the situation in Marmato and to agree upon new strategies which will lead to the desired success.

See Brittany Lambert's Blog :

Part 1 <http://ccic-ccci.blogspot.com/2012/02/defending-land-and-life-in-marmato.html>

Part 2 http://ccic-ccci.blogspot.com/2012/02/defending-land-and-life-in-marmato_16.html

Part 3 http://ccic-ccci.blogspot.com/2012/02/defending-land-and-life-in-marmato_20.html

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See Paul Webster's article in the National Catholic Reporter: <http://ncronline.org/news/global/colombian-gold-mining-village-fights-stay-put>



Chelsea and Steve helping clean coffee beans



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