

Canada as an Extractive State

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AGAINST THE CURRENT interviewed Todd Gordon, co-author (with Jeffery Webber) of Blood of Extraction: Canadian Imperialism in Latin America about mining operations in Canada and internationally. He is a socialist activist in Toronto and a member of the Toronto New Socialists.

Against the Current: It seems that Canadian capital is involved in mining operations – and environmental disasters – around the Global South. Where are these operations located, and who are the main corporate players?

Todd Gordon: Canada has the largest extractive industry in the world, with operating mines and exploration assets on every continent. Latin America is the region in which Canadian companies have traditionally had the greatest presence.

The industry's internationalism has been facilitated by the regulatory permissiveness of Canadian laws and, connected to this, the central role that Canadian stock exchanges have played historically in raising investment capital.

Perhaps the most infamous Canadian mining companies in recent years have been Barrick Gold and Goldcorp (which was recently purchased by an American company), known for their involvement in rights abuses in several different countries. But there are a lot of Canadian companies, including small junior ones few would have heard of, implicated in human rights abuses.

ATC: Where have the biggest confrontations with indigenous peoples happened? Where have the biggest disasters taken place – and who paid for them in the end?

T.G.: I think it is important first to note that many (though not all) of these Canadian companies had their start in Canada on indigenous land. Here they developed the skills at both legal and forceful dispossession, ecological plunder, and circumventing labour rights.

Internationally, there have been significant confrontations with indigenous peoples in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Tanzania, the Philippines, and Papua New Guinea, among other countries.

A study by the Justice and Corporate Accountability Project [<https://bit.ly/2SOkL17>] at Osgood Hall Law School in Toronto found for the years 2000-2015 that Canadian companies operating in Latin America were implicated in 44 deaths (44 of which it identified as “targeted”), 403 injuries (of which 363 occurred during demonstrations or confrontations), and 709 cases of criminalization.

Canadian extractive companies, and their financial backers, are almost never held accountable. They may wield influence in the country in which the abuses occur, and there is no law in Canada that holds them accountable for violence that occurs in their name abroad.

Currently, there are lawsuits before Canadian courts against two Canadian companies, one for the

alleged use of forced labor in Eritrea and the other for alleged involvement in the gang rape and murder of opponents in Guatemala. Canadian mining and oil and gas companies also had ties to Colombian paramilitaries.

When ecological disaster occurs, such as spills of toxic chemicals, rarely is the Canadian company held fully accountable, if it's held accountable at all.

The most effective challenge to the predatory practices of these companies have come not from the courts, but from the indigenous communities deploying direct action and sabotage. In some cases they've stopped mines from operating, such as in Ecuador.

ATC: Are there connections between Canadian extraction industries operating globally and the fights inside Canada over pipeline expansion?

T.G.: There have been connections made around extraction at home and abroad, though it's not especially well developed.

Indigenous people in Canada have participated in solidarity trips abroad, and have welcomed activists from abroad to their territories in the Canadian state. The union movement has also brought activists abroad to Canada for speaking tours.

ATC: What kind of movements and organizations exist in Canada in solidarity with indigenous movements resisting these global operations? Do any of Canada's political parties, including the Greens, take up these issues?

T.G.: As I previously noted, indigenous communities have been at the forefront. Unions have also played a role. There are also NGOs that have done important work raising awareness, organizing tours abroad for Canadians, and trying to build support for international struggles. But I wouldn't say there's a movement per se at this point, even though awareness has grown considerably over the last couple decades.

The New Democratic Party and the Greens have offered more consistent criticism, and the NDP has promoted legal reform targeting the international activities of Canadian companies. But as an opposition party, it's gone nowhere. The Liberals and Conservatives have done nothing in government beyond issuing platitudes around "corporate social responsibility."

ATC: What about the Trudeau Liberal government, with its environmentally friendly rhetoric and its extractivist policies?

T.G.: The Liberals are a bourgeois party, uninterested in meaningful reform. They're hypocrites who, unlike the Conservatives, will try to offer a progressive veneer to their policies.

So, for example, they argue that the Trans Mountain pipeline, which they just recently purchased from Kinder Morgan and which will carry natural gas from Alberta to the British Columbian coast through indigenous territory, will help to reduce carbon emissions because Alberta will be more likely to agree to emissions reductions if this pipeline is completed.

They make public efforts at talking about "reconciliation" with indigenous people, and recognizing past injustices, even appointing an indigenous woman to a top level cabinet post. But then the next moment they'll send paramilitaries to smash a blockade against another pipeline on indigenous territory and jail indigenous activists, as they recently did to the Wet'suwet'en.

Internationally, they talk about "rule of law" and "corporate social responsibility." Yet, just like their

Conservative predecessors, they have refused to introduce any law that would hold Canadian extractive companies accountable for any violence or eco-destruction in which they're implicated.

Canadian extractive companies, supported by Canadian (and international) financial investors have a significant global presence, and the Liberals are fully supportive of the industry.

ATC: One of the problems that progressive governments in Latin America face is that the economy is built around extraction. What steps would a country have to take to break from that model?

T.G.: This is a very important question. Extraction appears for many governments (across the spectrum) as a quick way to develop a country, and for some supposedly a way to reduce dependence over time on the Global North. But we know that day doesn't come.

Even if more assertive measures are taken to limit the influence of foreign capital and/or increase taxes and royalties, or even nationalize an extractive sector, there's still the question of the rights of indigenous peoples' in these countries and the ecological consequences of expanded extraction.

While countries may be unable to extricate themselves quickly from dependence on resource extraction, especially without the support of wealthier countries, history tells us that extraction won't lead to greater shared prosperity in these countries.

The solution will have to be greener, planned economic diversity and management, more international, and based on strictly limiting the power of capital (domestic or foreign). And this will only be possible through the building of mass movements from below.

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