

Aviva Chomsky, Garry Leech, and Steve Striffler, eds.

***The People Behind Colombian Coal: Mining,
Multinationals and Human Rights***

Casa Editorial Pisando Callos, 2007. 200 pp.

Meri L. Clark / Western New England College

Since the early 1980s, the people of the Guajira peninsula of northern Colombia have seen the expansion and intensification of coal mining at the Cerrejón Mine, the largest open-pit coal mine in the world. Though the Colombian government and the Consortium of BHP Billiton, Anglo American, and Xstrata/Glencore promised much, its significant result so far is that many have lost their land to the international consortium, victims of the haste to realize quick profits from coal and its derivatives. Energy corporations and consumers have subsumed indigenous lives, livelihoods, and cultures in the Guajira. The collection's editors Steve Striffler, Aviva Chomsky, and Garry Leech link coal-fueled electricity in the northern hemisphere to the dramatic human and environmental toll of mining in the Guajira.

The People Behind Colombian Coal contributes to a dialogue about the global south—a zone of uneven interaction between the forces of capitalism and humanitarian, cultural, social, and ecological interests south of the equator. Even as the global south has become synonymous with poverty, the northern hemisphere depends on it for a wealth of resources, including its people. Colombian coal is exported primarily to power plants serving North America, Europe, and some other parts of Latin America. Coal flows in the same direction as political power: southern producers serve the global north and northern consumers and Colombia is fifth in the ranks of the world's coal producers. Addressing this dynamic, the authors level serious charges: Colombian coal is cheap because the multinational mining company and its state partners ignore, or eliminate, indigenous and union leaders.

The People Behind Colombian Coal considers the mining company's almost thirty-year presence in the Guajira Peninsula. The collection gives voice to Wayuu leaders, trade unionists, committed scholars, and international solidarity workers. The editors outline the Colombian and global context of the collected voices on the Cerrejón mine. However, they just mention the Constitution of 1991 guaranteeing rights of African-descended and indigenous communities and do not discuss the government's privatization campaign of the 1990s, a process that included Carbocol from 2000 to 2005.

One of the finest essays is Remedios Fajardo Gómez's poignant account of the Yanama belief in the company's "proposals of sustainable exploitation" and promised development and jobs for her people. Faith turned to dismay when the scale of environmental destruction and disregard for indigenous values and laws became clear. Her allegation that the company violated sacred spaces, including cemeteries, strikes a particularly painful

chord. Fajardo Gómez also examines "first world" exploitation of "third world" resources, and the human and cultural dimensions of development.

S. L. Reiter's essay, "The Ethics of El Cerrejón and the Multinationals," will likely provoke discussion as she argues that, if individuals acted like this multinational, they would be prosecuted for human rights crimes. It is unclear who would pursue such a course and Reiter's tone might push some readers to forsake dialogue, but she offers a useful framework to analyze global trade and human rights. One wishes that her essay had been integrated better with the rest of the collection.

The second section examines social, cultural, and environmental issues in the Cerrejón zone (1983-2004). The interesting 1983 essay by anthropologist Deborah Pacini Hernandez links the mine to increased westernization (in diet and clothing, particularly) and the degradation of Wayuu social identity. Wayuu anthropologist Weidler Guerra Curvelo's 1991 essay assesses a decade of mining with more ambivalence. He lists the negatives: continued displacement, loss of income from fishing and farming, lack of remuneration, restructuring indigenous physical and sacred lands for a road. But there are benefits: some increases in commerce, jobs, royalties, state aid, and political recognition of the Wayuu. The tally is not an even draw, but it is important to consider whether the mine has brought any gains.

The company presents a Hobson's choice: leave one's home for an uncertain future in a distant city or stay and suffer. A 1997 essay by Robert Dover, Marla Zapach, and Marta Rincón holds the Colombian government has never preserved the Wayuu and delays state obligation to them. Illness, environmental destruction, and economic crisis have pushed Wayuu from five resguardos into cities. Remaining residents fight the mine's encroachment but are trapped in a precarious existence without water, electricity, schools, and medicine.

Two essays (Pulido, 2003 and Salas Bahamón, 2004) discuss differently the mine's environmental impact and the company's attempts to mitigate it. Pulido notes the mine's "voracious appetite for land" (81) but the company and government have not invested in reforestation, water and soil recovery, or people's relocation to workable farmlands. Salas Bahamón begins with the advantages: increased jobs, exports, royalties, foreign investment, and development. The company pays to offset socio-environmental problems: researching water supply, ocean life, and soil, and trying to combat erosion and deforestation.

Yet the mine's outsourced labor and relocations have broken homes and customs; it produces dust clouds and blast vibrations, limits physical mobility, increases train accidents, all of which contribute to socio-psychological strain on the mine's neighbors.

Part three addresses humanitarian concerns, intending to rouse international support for the cause. Armando Pérez Araújo alleges and details judicial corruption and systematic failure of the Colombian legal system in dealing with "the destruction of Tabaco." W. T. Whitney, Jr. and Timothy Bood (2006) found inadequate medicine and appeal for "task-oriented" aid, such as with respiratory illnesses linked to air pollution. Claudia Llantén (2006) found the majority reported "average" or "poor" health. Here the voices are chilling: "the mine has us encircled..." and "the coal scares us..." (120). Sintracarbón leaders' 2006-07 correspondence to international solidarity committees and bargaining documents follow.

Part Four introduces international solidarity workers through personal statements. Chomsky notes the new Sintracarbón relationship built on ties to existing unions. Chapters by Daniel Kovalik and Jeff Crosby temper that enthusiasm. More than 4,000 union leaders have been killed since the 1980s and the "narrow focus of trade unionism" poses obstacles to building solidarity in the U.S. for Colombia (165). Helen Berry, Richard Charlo, and Yvette Michaud offer valuable testimony about Cerrejón as Canadian unionists.

Part Five presents recent testimony and petitions from the Cerrejón region. In 2003, the community of Tabaco petitioned for legal status as a protected Afro-Colombian community with ancestral rights to collective lands. The petition was approved in 2004. In 2006, indigenous residents of Tamaquito II asked the international group Witness for Peace for food aid, transportation, and weaving materials, as well as help restoring access to education and health care and relocating to healthy lands. This concluding petition shows Guajira's ongoing struggles.

While the collection documents the daily degradation experienced by many Guajira communities it also poses several questions. First, whether there is any humanitarian way to develop energy resources? Second, given the legal and societal limits on unions, what mechanisms exist to pressure the multinational owners of El Cerrejón and La Loma to respond to community complaints? Third, given judicial and ministerial mismanagement in Colombia, can government paths be blazed toward solutions for the many interlocking problems in this case? Finally, if national efforts founder, how will international partnerships work? Some of the essays suggest answers, but they are not brought together here. Thematic sections with specific introductions would have explained the purpose behind each selection and highlighted the commonalities in the pieces. Such a structure would also have built a clearer narrative. Finally, more on the expansion of mining and distribution of coal and coal derivatives, especially by Colombia's second biggest producer, Alabama-based Drummond Corporation, would have been useful. Drummond has received concessions to develop its port at Santa Marta and expand operations from its base at La Loma mine, potentially recreating the conditions documented in the Guajira.

This collection does not indicate that any positive opinion about the mine exists. Opposing views might have strengthened this book as a kind of documentary sourcebook. For example, what do coal workers who have emigrated from other parts of Colombia think of El Cerrejón and life in the Guajira? Similarly, several essays allege the cultural loss of Wayuu, but health and environmental data form the bulk of the book. A more comprehensive historical, ethnographic discussion would better illuminate the struggles of Guajira's people today.

Read in combination with broader studies *The People Behind Colombian Coal* will be valuable in teaching college and advanced high school students to recognize and critique sociopolitical and economic forces at work globally. I hope that the editors will publish an historical analysis of resource exploitation in Colombia. For now, this book serves as a provocative source of powerful testimony about the contradictory forces at work in the Guajira and globally to obstruct and aid humanitarianism and environmentalism.