

## **Transformation néolibérale dans les champs aurifères de Colombie : stratégie de développement ou impérialisme capitaliste?**

Dermot O'Connor et Juan Pablo Bohórquez Montoya

### *Résumé*

*La transformation néolibérale dans les champs aurifères de Colombie sert surtout les intérêts à court terme des capitalistes étrangers aux dépens de ceux des travailleurs et des collectivités locales; les instigateurs de la révolution minière sont d'ailleurs l'État colombien et l'oligarchie financière. De fait, la transformation du secteur minier est dominée par la rhétorique du développement qui courtise les capitaux étrangers, mais le but réel est d'accélérer l'exploitation capitaliste et l'appropriation de ressources collectives par des intérêts privés, tout en minimisant la redistribution des profits aux travailleurs et aux communautés minières. Pour capitaliser sur les richesses naturelles du pays et vaincre la résistance populaire à la consolidation du contrôle capitaliste de grande échelle sur la production minière, l'État colombien a sollicité l'aide militaire et financière, l'expertise et la technologie de puissances étrangères, dans un climat mondial favorable à l'expansion capitaliste. Pour illustrer cette thèse, nous nous penchons sur les conflits suscités par les mégaprojets miniers dans Tolima et Santander, deux des trente-deux départements Colombiens.*

# Neoliberal Transformation in Colombia's Goldfields: Development Strategy or Capitalist Imperialism?

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## *Abstract*

*Neoliberal transformation in Colombia's goldfields serves the short-term interests of foreign capitalists at the expense of workers and communities, while the instigator of the "mining revolution" is actually the Colombian state and financial oligarchy. Indeed, the transformation of mining is driven by developmental rhetoric and courts foreign capital, but the aim is to deepen capitalist exploitation and private appropriation of collective resources while minimizing the redistribution of profits to workers and mining communities. In order to capitalize on natural resource endowments and overcome popular resistance to the consolidation of large-scale capitalist control over mining production, the Colombian state has enlisted the help of foreign military power, finance, expertise and technology in a global climate favourable to capitalist expansion. We illustrate this thesis by looking at conflicts over mining mega-projects in Tolima and Santander, two of Colombia's 32 sub-national governmental departments.*

## **Introduction**

Colombian Mines and Energy Minister Hernán Martínez declared a "mining revolution" after his office approved permits for foreign firms to develop gold-extraction megaprojects throughout the country (Business News America, 2008a). What is the goal of this "mining revolution" and what will it mean for Colombian workers and communities? Is increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the natural resource sector, along with U.S. military and police aid, sign of the success of a neoliberal development strategy designed to combat security threats, modernize mining, create jobs and integrate rural communities into the national economy in a sustainable and democratic manner (*Presidencia de la República de Colombia*, 2005: 10)? Or is the neoliberal transformation of Colombian mining a classic case of capitalist imperial expansion from the "north"

through accumulation by dispossession in the “south” (Gordon and Webber, 2008)?

While we agree that the “mining revolution” involves accumulation by dispossession as multinational corporations (MNCs) profit at the expense of Colombian producers and their communities, we argue that the key instigator is actually the Colombian ruling class. Indeed, the capitalist concentration of power over gold production in Colombia relies on foreign capital, international economic policy and neoliberal developmental rhetoric, but the aim is not the economically-democratic development of the collective mineral resources of the Colombian people. Rather, the goal is to forcibly transform the social property relations of production in Colombia’s goldfields by repressing artisanal producers and subordinating legalized small-scale mining to the interests of large firms.

First we question the neoliberal mining development orthodoxy with a discussion of the violent context of the transformation of Colombian mining. Refining neo-Marxist descriptions of the process as foreign capitalist imperialism, we offer a brief historical account of the territorial dimension of transnational capitalist cooperation to illustrate how the Colombian ruling class instigated the internationalization of mining over and against popular resistance from artisanal producers, rural social movements, labour and revolutionary groups. From the more general to the specific, we illustrate these dynamics with recent accounts of mining mega-projects under development in the Colombian departments of Tolima and Santander. These are two of Colombia’s 32 sub-national governmental departments and are located in the Andean highlands.

### **Neoliberal Transformation in Colombia’s Goldfields**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, privatization, debt-repayment, trade liberalization and FDI promotion were sold as remedies for the ostensible failure of import substitution industrialization (ISI) that would spur private wealth formation to “consolidate capitalism” and supposedly let revenues trickle-down to the masses in developing countries (Sachs, 1995). Privatization of state-owned resource firms, mining-code reforms to promote corporate access to natural resources, and the removal of barriers to entry for foreign capital figured strongly in neoliberal development recommendations (Rodriguez, 2004). Research on the globalization

of capital accumulation by mining MNCs suggests that although such activities contribute to national economic growth figures, profits are appropriated by firms and national governments while workers and communities bear the costs (Clark and North, 2006). Globalized mining and technological innovations are associated with job loss, the intensification of work-tasks, reliance on migrant labour, and social and family disruptions (Dansereau, 2006:19). MNC-led mining in Africa, Asia and Latin America has been accompanied by political violence and displacement in mining communities along with the deterioration of health through pollution and waste spills (Hilson and Haselip, 2004: 42). Even the Australian firm Rio Tinto RTZ, an industry leader in rhetoric on sustainable development and corporate-social responsibility, has left in its wake destroyed communities, displaced persons, and environmental disasters (Moody, 2007: 2-4).

Despite their poor environmental and social track-record, MNCs argue that their activities create jobs and that they conform better to environmental and workplace health and safety standards than small-scale and artisanal miners (AngloGold Ashanti, 2008b). According to distinctions made by the World Bank and mining academics, artisanal miners (often peasant farmers) informally operate mines without permits or recognized legal rights while small-scale miners are licensed, but both generally produce small outputs with low-tech inputs (Hentschel et al., 2003; World Bank, 1996; IEC, 1987a). Many artisanal and small-scale miners face poverty, adverse working conditions and are blamed for high-levels of pollution per unit of output (Hentschel et al., 2003: 6-11). The neoliberal orthodoxy is to discourage artisanal mining and recommend that the operations of the most productive artisanal miners be formalized or legalized as tax-paying and credit-worthy small and medium-scale operations through such means as mandatory export-licenses, mining titles, and environmental permits (World Bank, 1996: 50; Hentschel et al. 2003: 65).

In response to technical arguments against artisanal mining, anthropologist Jeanette Graulau sees potential for gender-equitable and ecologically sustainable artisanal mining in the Brazilian Amazon, where labour-intensive extraction techniques are performed in family groups in cooperation with the forest eco-system (2001: 75-77). Godoy lauds the efficiency of Bolivian peasant miners to limit input costs per unit of output and reduce the

scale of environmental destruction (1985: 115). Subjecting artisanal miners to state regulation is as much a political issue as a technical one. Large-scale mining proponents claim that regulating artisanal mining will create a pool of qualified small-scale miners who can efficiently and legally access marginal gold-deposits close to larger sites to provide a reserve of labourers for large-scale mining projects (but also agribusiness) to absorb surplus rural labourer and stave off rural exodus (Hentschel et al., 2003: 65). Rather than staving off rural exodus from the Colombian agricultural sector in the 1940s to the 1960s, *mass displacement* followed prescriptions for “accelerated development” and land concentration under control of “more efficient” large farms as the state “formalized” private property rights alongside repression and subordination of small peasant producers (Brittain, 2005: 337; Safford, 1995: 142-143; de Janvry, 1981: 132). In response, armed revolutionary peasant movements such as the FARC-EP (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo* – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People’s Army) were formed to defend small-holders and promote alternative rural development strategies against foreign and domestic state-led capitalist imperialism (Ampuero and Brittain, 2005; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2003: 178-179). Current attempts to deepen and extend large-scale capitalist exploitation in the goldfields have generated further opposition from rural social movements, miners’ syndicates, cooperatives and municipal governments (Martinez, 2009). Instead of making concessions to demands for more equitable access to mineral wealth and redistribution of royalties, the state has looked for foreign help in deepening large-scale capitalist development.

To attract foreign capital to Colombia, Presidents Barco (1986-1990) and Gaviria (1990-1994) began the process of neoliberal restructuring with tax cuts on capital goods imports while Samper (1994-1998) privatized state-entities including banks, airports and utilities, and partially sold-off state-shares in gas and mineral extraction firms (Browitt, 2001:1069). This privatization boom saw FDI peak at five per cent of GDP in 1997, but it was soon over (Ahumada, 2007: 231-234). Data from DANE (*Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas de Colombia* – National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia) shows FDI flows to Colombian mines and quarries only in the tens of millions of dollars throughout most of the 1990s, with net capital flight in 1995 and 1998. Only a handful of foreign-based junior mining companies

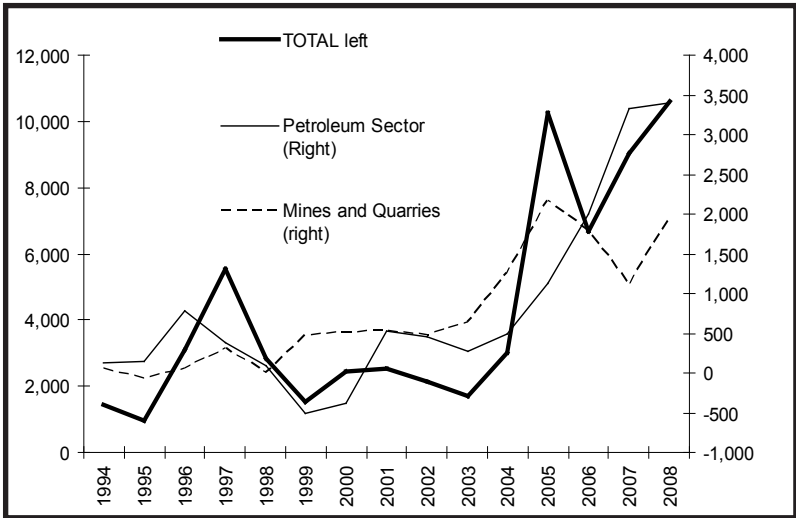
explored the country for gold, often in regions where the Colombian state had little effective authority (Harris, 2006b).

Promising finds drew more investment – around US \$500 million annually between 1999 and 2002. In 2002, with the backing of the U.S., newly elected President Alvaro Uribe Vélez offered military support to protect the operations of MNCs (Business News Americas, 2002). FDI in Colombia shot up from two per cent of GDP in 2003, to nine per cent in 2005 (at over US \$10 billion) and remained above US \$9 billion in 2007 (World Bank, 2008). Gross Domestic Product grew from US\$100 billion in 2002, to almost US \$250 billion in 2008 (World Bank, 2009). At least part of this growth can be attributed to increased foreign investment in Colombia's extractive resources sector. We can see in Figure 1 that FDI in mines and quarries shot up to US \$1.2 billion by 2004 and to US \$2.1 billion in 2005. Despite subsequent declines, in 2008 FDI in mines and quarries was again up near US \$2.0 billion as world gold prices remained high. Not only FDI was on the rise but greater access to foreign financing boosted production from existing mines from 21.4 metric tonnes of gold in 1999 (Goldfields, 2000) to 46.5 and 35.79 metric tonnes in 2003 and 2005 respectively (US Geological Survey, 2007: 1.14).

If neoliberal reforms have attracted FDI outside the halls of power, it is recognized that the benefits are narrowly distributed as revenues are diverted from workers and the public purse and into the hands of international creditors, transnational corporations, and local ruling classes, alongside increasingly authoritarian tactics against labour (Harris, 2003: 366; Ahumada, 2007: 232; Browitt, 2001: 1068). Despite claims by neoliberal proponents in Colombia, the process of enclosure of territorial mineral endowments and the state's enforcement of private mineral extraction rights is a highly politicized and extremely violent process whose goal is to further the interests of capitalists at the expense of small-scale rural producers, urban workers and their communities.

The 1980s ended with a slaughter of the Colombian left including four presidential candidates, 3000 party activists and tens of thousands of supporters of the Unión Patriótica (Melo, 1998: 81). CODHES (*Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento* – Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement), part of the non-governmental commission that follows public policy on forced displacement, reports that between

**Figure 1: FDI in Colombian Extractive Industries in \$US millions (1994-2008)**



Source: DANE, 2009 (various years)

1985 and 2008, 4,629,190 people were forcibly displaced from rural areas (CODHES, 2009a). With the figures from 2009 included, the total number of internally displaced persons will approach 5 million. CODHES contrasts their statistics with government reports of 2,977,209 persons displaced between 1997 and 2008. The president of CODHES, Jorge Rojas, claims that of those recognized by the government, 2.1 million persons have been displaced during the presidential mandates of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (CODHES, 2009b). Displaced persons have reported land losses approaching seven million hectares (Reyes Posada, 2009). Revealing much about the nature of the neoliberal transformation of the mining sector, it has been estimated that 68 per cent of displaced persons come from mining zones (Ramirez, 2005: 68).

While civilian displacement has followed violent clashes between all armed groups in Colombia's armed conflict, the vast majority of incidents in *mineral-rich* zones are the deliberate result of paramilitaries that use displacement as an instrument in their attempts to expropriate valuable land and turn it over to big landowners and/or multinational corporations (Ibáñez and Vélez, 2005: 7-8; Meertens and Stoller, 2001: 134; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2004: 269). Displacement has coincided with an increasing willingness of the U.S. to mobilize armed force or fund military and police infrastructure to protect its

strategic interests in Colombia, dating from the 1980s (Dunning and Wirpsa, 2004: 82). In areas of Colombia where the government exercises little authority, MNCs interested in developing extractive industries projects are often charged levies by the FARC-EP (referred to also as FARC) and the ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* – National Liberation Army) to support their revolutionary activities and fund local social infrastructure, vocational training, and rural agricultural development (Brittain, 2007; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008).<sup>2</sup> In turn, MNCs demand armed protection from the state.

In collusion with landowning elements within the Colombian state and modelled after landowners' private armies from the 1960s, various paramilitary armies were formed in the 1980s to undermine the social basis for both armed and non-violent opposition to the state and capital, including organized labour and radical peasant, and indigenous groups (Hristov, 2009). Paramilitary violence aimed at civilians prompted displacement and lands were taken over by the paramilitaries who then sold them to wealthy investors (including narco-capitalists). In addition to injustice, human rights violations and the social turmoil of mass migration in post-displacement resource-rich regions, the influx of migrant labour and foreign currency put inflationary pressure on wages, rents and commodity prices that hampered remaining small farmers' ability to produce (Richani, 2005: 116-22). By the late 1990s, an increasingly radical and vocal mass of protestors from rural social movements, mining syndicates, cooperatives, human rights groups, displaced persons organizations and organized labour regularly protested the actions of multinational corporations, paramilitaries and the state in the streets of Barrancabermeja, Bucaramanga, Bogotá, Medellín and Cali (Ramirez, 2005; CINEP, 2009).

The response of the state was to deepen repression through shadowy paramilitary organizations and expand its alliance with foreign capital (Hristov, 2009). Injections of U.S. military aid through *Plan Colombia* were initially US \$1.3 billion from 2000 to 2002. This was supplemented by an additional US \$621 million in 2003, US \$549 million in 2004 and US \$629 million in 2005 (Stokes, 2006: 378). The U.S.-based Center for International Policy (CIP) reports that the United States has committed military and police program funding (including counter-terrorist, counter-narcotics, and foreign military financing) to the Colombian state to the tune of US \$581 million in 2006, US \$593 million in 2007, US \$421 million in 2008,



US \$419 million in 2009 and a projected US \$404 million for 2010 (CIP, 2009). In November 2009, Colombia and the United States signed a military cooperation agreement that renewed U.S. access to seven military bases on Colombian soil (CIP, 2009). The expanded presence of U.S. counter-insurgency forces in Colombia is seen primarily by Democrats and Republicans in the U.S., and various political elements within Colombia, as the means to protect private property from “narco-terrorists” in order to promote “democratic security,” while critics see them as the impetus for state-sponsored terrorism (Stokes, 2006: 370-371). In a broader context of neoliberal reform, the full privatizations of Minercol<sup>3</sup> and Ecopetrol, the state mining and petrol companies, were completed by President Uribe against popular opposition and alongside state-led intimidation, assassinations and violence against workers and unionists (Moody, 2007: 23; Ramirez, 2005; Garcia et al., 2009). How then are we to understand neoliberal transformations?

### **Capitalist Imperialism**

Aware of the violence of neoliberal restructuring and the role of foreign capital and state power, Gordon and Webber (2008) consider the transformation of Colombian mining as a case of capitalist imperialism. They attribute imperial expansion to the need to resolve the over-accumulation crisis afflicting capitalists in the global “north” since the 1970s and see neoliberalism as a “spatial fix” whereby northern states and the Bretton Woods institutions make states like Colombia “submit” to liberalization to create profitable expansion opportunities for MNCs (2008: 65-66). Too much emphasis is put on the role of the Canadian state as an instigator of the transformation of Colombian mining; after all, it is the American state that provides military aid to the Colombian security forces, who, along with U.S. forces, private military contractors and paramilitaries offer “security” in Colombia for the activities of MNCs from a variety of countries (Richani, 2005). To suggest that the expansion of capital accumulation across national boundaries is driven solely by the internal systemic logic of capitalism within the core capitalist countries (unencumbered by national boundaries abroad) is to neglect the importance of the territorial aspect of struggles for political power (including class conflict) in the modernizing nation-state and its *interaction* with the globalizing tendency of capital accumulation (Lacher, 2006). Localized class conflicts over production can, for

a wealthy minority, create a considerable interest in attracting and maintaining the support of foreign capital.

Indeed, acquisitions of mining concessions by Canadian firms in Colombia following forced displacement are clear examples of David Harvey's (2004) "accumulation by dispossession." Gordon and Webber note that the "aggressive restructuring of social relations" has been a violent process whereby Canadian mining companies benefit while locals are "subordinated to the whims of capital" (2008: 65). An elaboration is in order to avoid the impression that subordination of locals is incidental to imperial plunder for profit, an elaboration that includes the role of the Colombian state. Whether it is called "on-going accumulation by dispossession" or *primitive accumulation*, the private appropriation of public domains has had historically specific consequences (deliberate or not) beyond the generation of short-term profits from plunder. Marx (1976: 874-875) claims that the secret of so-called primitive accumulation is that the divorce of primary producers from the means of production creates the necessary precondition for capitalism: a pool of precarious workers whose survival now rests on selling their labour power to capitalists. To this end, targeted forced displacement of small farmers and artisanal miners from mineral rich zones by the state or paramilitaries is the political tool that expands the pool of exploitable *Colombian* workers available. Consuelo Ahumada recognizes that to attract FDI with low wage-levels and integrate its economy into the international division of labour and globalized production chains, the Colombian ruling class deliberately mobilizes and "flexibilizes" a pool of precarious workers using authoritarian repression (2007: 225-227).

In response to attempts at excluding peasant and artisanal producers from access to lands, rivers, fisheries, mines and forests, for one, and as a result of the casualization of wage labourers for another, many Colombians rely on casual employment to survive – as much as 50 to 60 per cent of Colombians work in the informal economy, unprotected by labour laws and officially omitted from national accounts (Arango, Misas and López, 2006: 159; 165-166). The informal economy is associated with the illicit transnational economy of narcotics production, money laundering, human trafficking and unauthorized currency exchanges. While there may be integration between the informal and illicit economies, especially in the parallel market for consumer goods or in some

coca-producing rural areas, the informal sector is not simply reducible to the illicit economy (Brittain, 2007; O'Connor, 2009). For one, in cities the informal economy includes casual labourers, domestic workers, street vendors and recyclers, while in rural areas the informal economy can be further disaggregated into regionally-based modes of production consisting of large extended families that have developed cultural geographies of agricultural activities, small manufactures and complementary forms of production and exchange (Bohorquez, 2009). Combined modes of production are based on social relations that include market exchange, payment in kind or in labour, and part-time or seasonal wage labour alongside subsistence production (Deere and León de Leal, 1982: 33-39). These localized economies are not simply atavistic, just as the *latifundia/minifundia* system is not simply a colonial inheritance, but rather are products of and forms of resistance to capitalist modernization.

Indeed, peasant production exists alongside and within the broader Colombian national capitalist economy based on agricultural and natural resource exports, industrial production and a growing service sector, integrated into a world capitalist system (Brittain and Sacouman, 2008: 66; Safford, 1995: 128-129). In the capitalist transformation in Colombian agriculture from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of coffee and banana exports and stockbreeding, many marginalized agricultural wage-labourers returned to subsistence agricultural production when they were not needed by larger more technologically advanced agribusiness operations, often through slash and burn colonization (LeGrand, 1986: xii; de Janvry, 1981: 136). The existence of subsistence activities alongside agribusiness allowed capitalists to force occasional wage workers to bear the cost of their own subsistence and social reproduction (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2002: 48). Peasant production still provides cheap food and occasional labour to the formal sector (Forero Álvarez, 2006). Despite attempts to supplant small-holdings with large-scale bio-combustible fuel production on heavily concentrated rural landholdings (González Posso, 2007: 7), and despite competition from cheap foreign imports, small-scale family farms continue to provide 50 per cent of Colombia's food production and account for 70 per cent of food products consumed in Bogotá, albeit on increasingly smaller plots (Forero Álvarez, 2006: 44). Thus, while not atavistic, the maintenance of combined capitalist and peasant production on family farms or in artisanal

communities, some in the informal economy and some legalized as small firms, is not to be seen simply as a tool for the advance of capitalism, even if the capitalist state and industry exploit it as such to drive down wages. As much as they are results of attempts at domination, combined economies are also forms of creative adaptation and popular resistance to threats of expropriation from large-scale agro-capitalist expansion in the countryside.

While not inevitable, *real* subsumption of individual producers or of whole sectors of production to capitalist social relations occurs when the means of production are fully controlled by private property and where labour is completely commodified; then the production process is governed by social relations *sui generis* to capital with exploitation deepening as “relative” surplus value per worker appropriated by capitalists is increased through the instrumental application of science and technology (Marx, 1976: 1019-1039). However, in transitions to capitalism, when producers manage to maintain access to the means of production, attempts at subsumption or incorporation of non-capitalist producers into capitalist social relations by state power are only *formal*, since they involve the imposition of conditions over production designed to serve capitalist development without substantially modifying the process of production itself (Marx, 1976: 645-646). For our purposes, formal subsumption refers to state regulations to legalize artisanal miners as small-scale producers that do not alter substantially the technology used or the scale of production.

Producers respond to threats of expropriation and subsumption to capital by maintaining their hybrid or combined modes of production using the technology available to them, even if it is outdated or labour intensive (Marx, 1976: 645). Independent miners who are free to access public lands and own their tools, even if they sell gold to merchant-capital or bankers at prices dictated by the capitalist world market, appropriate a greater share of the value per ounce of gold produced than they would if they were wage workers in a large firm (Echeverry and Jaime, 1988). Such producers are not coerced by technological change and capitalist control over the means of production to produce surplus value over and above the cost of their own daily subsistence. While some successful or ambitious small scale producers do expand their productive capacities through technological adaptation, accessing credit, or the employment of wage-labour from within their community or family,

even to the point where they may become competitive medium-scale capitalist firms, the historical evidence we discuss below suggests that technical and financial limits to such an “endogenous” process of capitalist development in the mining sector were reached in Colombia at various periods, while artisanal mining persisted, resulting in combined modes of gold production that capitalist “development” now looks to foreign capital to supplant.

Producers in Colombia express their opposition to formal attempts at subsumption to capital through disobedience to regulations, ignoring commercial taxes imposed by the state, through cultural practices such as regional food or music tastes, or through non conventional political practices such as demonstrations, roadblocks or land occupations (Bohórquez Montoya, 2009). Through the social organization and political protection of modes of production characterized by resistance to capitalist social relations in the production process, artisanal and small-scale gold miners are not the “real agents” of capitalist production, but on the contrary, they demonstrate conscious opposition to the expansion of capitalist accumulation by fighting to maintain their access to the means of production. While “formalization” of artisanal miners into legally recognized and regulated “small-scale” mining businesses represent attempts at *formal* subsumption of producers to legal control by the capitalist state, forced displacement of mining communities by the Colombian oligarchy (whether through hired mercenaries or state security forces) are attempts to accelerate the *real* subsumption of artisanal mining communities into capitalist social relations through enclosure and the divorce of producers from the means of production. Conscious collective subjectivity in opposition to capitalist expansion is manifested through popular mobilization, strikes, marches, roadblocks and, for some, through the support of anti-imperialist revolutionary movements such as the FARC-EP or ELN (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2003: 169-175).

Instead of reforms that would promote democratic forms of rural development, sustain cultural geographies of production distinct from globalizing capital and cultural homogenization, and integrate demands made by peasants, workers, protesters and revolutionary movements for health and social programs, land reform, or alternative modes of production based on ecological sustainability, the Colombian political class has instead chosen to intensify its policy of economic, social and cultural repression of producers

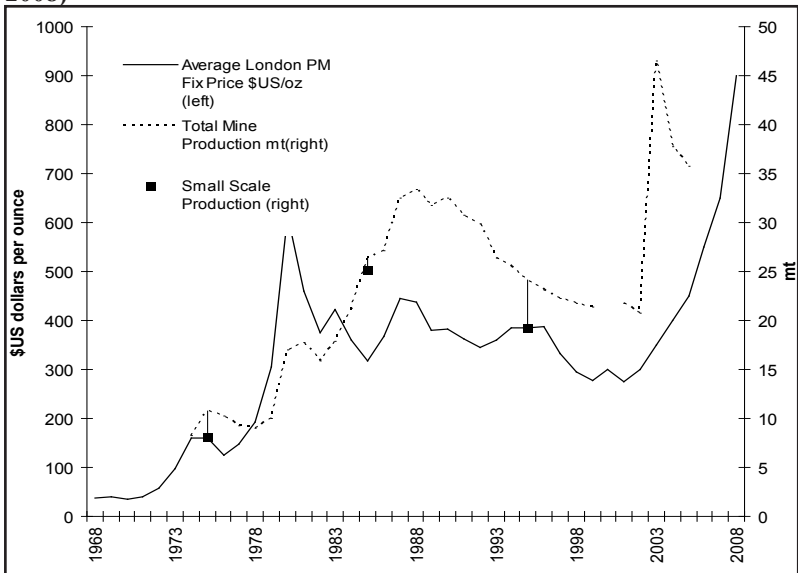
through capitalist expansion (Ampuero and Brittain, 2005: 378). The failure, or refusal, to respond to popular demands drives the Colombian financial oligarchy to seek the support of transnational capital in the neoliberal era. This is much like the emerging continental capitalist classes in the nineteenth century free-trade era who sought foreign investment from capitalists in other countries to develop the productive forces of their industries in that alliance of the exploiters over the exploited (Marx, 1976: 388). Neo-Marxist descriptions of the advance of transnational mining into Colombia as foreign-led capitalist imperialism, surprisingly, tend to overlook how neoliberal reforms favour the Colombian capitalist class. By our account, the motive for the territorial elite to liberalize Colombia to expand foreign-led capital accumulation, originates in its need to overcome territorially-based class contestations to capitalist rule, emanating from resistance to capitalist expansion at the point of production, local cultures of resistance and peasant revolutionary organization.

### **The Contested Terrain of the Colombian Goldfields**

Nueva Granada was the source of 185,000 kg of gold extracted by forced indigenous labour between 1503 and 1660, increasing by a fifth the stock of European bullion (Wolf, 1997: 135). When indigenous labour had been exhausted in the late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries, African slaves were imported (IEC, 1987a: 45-46). During the wars of independence, from 1810 to 1820, gold mines were abandoned as slaves and labourers were conscripted, while post-independence, accumulated wealth from larger proto-capitalist mines where wage labour was employed was gradually invested in agricultural plantations (Bushnell, 1993: 48-49). Many former slaves and other free peasants turned to subsistence agriculture alongside artisanal placer mining where local geology permitted, while owners of established mines turned to foreign investment and technology to overcome technical limits to production. In 1883, Vicente Restrepo wrote that “one can be sure that any capital, whether Colombian or foreign, destined toward exploiting the numerous gold mines would be put to good use and would produce a considerable interest, above all if the underground workers were to be directed by foreigners wise in the art of mining” (1979(1883): 18).

Throughout the twentieth century, capitalist gold extraction was carried out by a few cash-strapped Colombian firms while British and American firms came and went depending on global financial conditions and gold prices (IEC, 1987a). Meanwhile, the practice of “folk-mining” based on labour intensive methods has long been noted by observers of the Colombian gold sector (West, 1952: 330). Friedemann (1986) describes Afro-Colombian peasant gold mining and farming operations in kin-based systems of communal property rights called *trancos* which enabled them to navigate the uncertain labour market in nearby oil fields or construction projects, even though they faced attempts by the state to alter their customary land-use titles by designating them as squatters on public lands. The IEC (*Instituto de Estudios Colombianos*), in a modernisation plan commissioned by the Ministry for Mines and Energy, reports how large numbers of small producers using traditional/low-tech methods accounted for as much as 87 per cent of Colombian gold produced in the mid-1970s. By the late 1970s with gold prices favourable, artisanal miners were joined by micro-level gold entrepreneurs, who together accounted for as much as 95 per cent of national production by 1985 (IEC, 1987a; 1987b).

**Figure 2: Colombian Gold Production and the World Market (1968-2008)**



Sources: Gold Fields, 1985, 1995, 2000; US Geological Survey, 2007;

IEC, 1987a, 1987b

To capitalize on Colombia's gold resources, the 1987 IEC report recommends FDI as a way to develop the productive potential of existing large-scale national mining companies (1987a: 255). Increased state control over gold merchants and small producers would reduce the loss of gold revenues to the black market for gold in Panama that escaped the monopoly of the *Banco de la República* (the state-run central bank of Colombia) over gold purchases (*Ibid*). The publicly owned *Caja Agraria* (Agricultural Bank), the only reliable and legal source of credit for peasants looking to expand into mining (Echeverry and Jaime, 1988: 16), was privatized by the Samper government in 1994 (Browitt, 2001: 1068-1069). While Sintraminercol (the union of workers in the former state-owned mining company Minercol Ltd) helped garner public financial assistance in legalizing artisanal coal miners after 1994, the same was not true for other mining sectors (Zamora, 2000). By the mid-1990s it was estimated that 80 per cent of Colombia's gold was produced by small producers, well below the 1980s level, while as many as 30 large and medium-scale companies produced the rest (World Bank, 1996: 7).

Further recommendations for formal subsumption of artisanal miners to capitalist development appear in a 1996 World Bank report which called for Colombia to reform its mining sector (after the fashion of earlier reforms in Chile under Pinochet). Cadastral systems were to be updated to liberalize corporate access to land and mineral resources. The most productive artisanal gold-mining operations were to be legalized as small-scale operations and targeted by investors (World Bank, 1996: xi-xv). Note how early attempts at mining sector reform in Colombia preceded World Bank recommendations. This follows the pattern of restructuring of rural social relations through food policy programmes in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, the adoption of policies congruent with those of international lending agencies was a manifestation of the self-interest of the Colombian policy elite and agribusiness at the expense of poor farmers (Sanders, 1981: 100). Indeed, the Colombian oligarchy continued to institute neoliberal reforms in the mining sector in the 1990s with help from international powers, but it used its own brutal methods.

In 1997, the AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* – United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia)<sup>4</sup> sacked artisanal mining zones in the Department of Bolivar, burning villages, assassinating



peasant-mining unionists, and displacing 20,000 people. Meanwhile, Conquistador Goldmines, a Canadian/Colombian subsidiary of U.S.-owned Corona Goldfields, was busy acquiring mining concessions in the area. These firms, assisted by the Canadian government, employed Colombian lawyers who were simultaneously engaged in redrafting the Colombian Mining Code in accord with World Bank guidelines (Gordon and Webber, 2008; Richani, 2005; Ramirez, 2005). If Conquistador Goldmines claimed mineral rights for the Corona (crown) they could only do it with local help. Ramirez documents how Colombian lawyers, politicians and businessmen, including those close to Presidents Samper and Pastrana, attached particular clauses to the Mining Code so they could personally profit from land and concession acquisitions based on inside knowledge of property disputes in gold rich areas and their propensity to use coercive force to displace residents (2005: 42-55).

In 2001, the Colombian Congress approved Mining Code Law 685. This law eased restrictions on foreign-ownership of concessions, liberalized the cadastral system, and removed restrictions on licensed corporate mining activity on public lands (with the exception of some urban areas, Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and ecological reserves). The law made mandatory environmental impact assessments, enabled the transfer of exploration rights and titles through the market, and gave the state discretionary powers to expropriate surface property so concession holders could develop sub-surface deposits (Rodriguez, 2004: 35-39). Rodriguez (2004) notes that the 2001 Mining Code designates *in situ* minerals as the property of the “state” and not the “nation” of Colombia. Before 2001, Colombian citizens (as members of the nation) could legally mine on public lands. After 2001, private appropriation of the mineral properties of the “state” required authorization. Artisanal miners have thus become vulnerable to expropriation, either by paramilitary groups that displace unlicensed miners, legalize the concessions and sell them to mining firms (usually MNCs), or by state-security forces who, charged with enforcing the law, can legally expropriate “squatters” from mining concessions claimed by licensed firms (El Pais, Op. Ed., 2009b). Formalization of mining has thus meant the criminalization of communities of peasant miners (Ramirez, 2005: 58), often alongside public criticisms that label them as menaces, nuisances or threats to society (El Pais, Op. Ed., 2009a).

Colombia's latest *National Plan for Mineral Development* recommends that the state consolidate regulatory authority over mining and promote development with "effective incentives for channeling private investment" (*Ministerio de Minas y Energía*, 2006: 13). Again, artisanal miners are targeted for formal subsumption to capitalist social relations through mandatory technical qualification and incorporation into the tax system – more examples of formal steps that look to curtail any small-scale economic activity independent of big Colombian or foreign capital. Neoliberal reforms are consistent with the plans of the Colombian ruling class to modernize the economy through the *formal* subsumption of artisanal miners as legalized small-scale miners, and the *real* subsumption of legalized small-scale producers into large-scale capitalist production. While MNCs will profit from the capitalist transformation of Colombia's goldfields at the expense of Colombian workers and communities, the Colombian state offers MNCs access to Colombia's gold deposits in exchange for finance, expertise and technology for capitalist development. Further, the Colombian state uses foreign military aid sent to protect MNCs to overcome political opposition to capitalist class rule through accelerated efforts to subsume small-scale producers into capitalist social relations. As with the capitalist transformation of agricultural production (Brittain, 2005), the acceleration of capitalist transformation in the mining sector involves the violent expropriation of rural producers.

### **Greystar Resources Ltd and Angostura in California-Vetas**

Greystar Resources Ltd is sole owner of the Angostura gold mining project with 13 concessions on 30,000 ha in Santander's California-Vetas artisanal mining district (Greystar, 2009: 1). From 1994 to 1998, the Vancouver-based company acquired concessions and explored for gold while paying taxes to the FARC and ELN in the form of small-payments to local schools, medical clinics, and infrastructure. When the company let their payments lapse in 1998, the FARC took a Greystar subcontractor hostage (Knox, 1998). Between 1995 and 1999, armed conflict intensified in the municipality of California. CINEP (*Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular* – Centre for Research and Popular Education) reports attacks by the ELN against military targets, combat between the FARC and the National Army, and four National Police attacks on the FARC and ELN (2009). Greystar suspended field operations

in 1999 as state forces retreated (Northern Miner, 2005). Local mining cooperatives and unions contested Greystar's operations by continuing artisanal mining, through informal protest and by legal injunctions until 2003, when state forces suppressed small-scale mining activity on Greystar's concession (Greystar, 2009: 85). With Alvaro Uribe Vélez in power, government forces were sent into California to combat the FARC and ELN, force 180 artisanal miners off the Angostura site, and set up two "battalion sized" military bases to the north and south of Angostura (Northern Miner, 2005). CINEP registers two episodes of collective forced displacement from the nearby towns of California and Suratá (CINEP, 2009). When Greystar executive Frederick Felder flew over the site in a Colombian military helicopter in 2003, he found that it had been planted with anti-personnel landmines (Harris, 2006b) laid out in retaliation for the displacement of peasant miners by the ELN (CINEP, 2009).

As part of a trend that sees politicians try to circumvent environmental restrictions on mining and local opposition, since 2004, Congress has blocked proposals to limit strip-mining in the sensitive California-Vetas "Paramos" ecosystem which features endangered species and protected flora and fauna (Vanguardia Liberal, 2004). With armed protection for its operations, environmental permits in hand, and a constitutional framework in place that prioritizes the rights of private corporations to exploit *in situ* mineral property over the surface property rights of locals, "Greystar has initiated the process of negotiation with the land owners to obtain right of ways or to purchase the properties outright" (Greystar, 2009: 67).

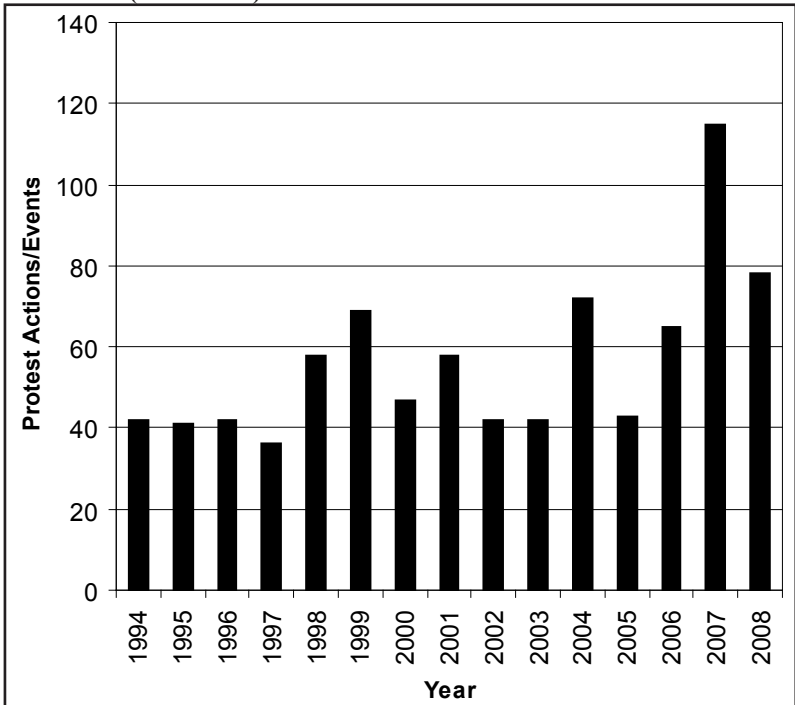
In its environmental impact report to the Ministry of the Environment, Greystar outlines how it expects to impact the local environment and population of the California municipality, where 9446 people live within 20 km of Angostura (Greystar, 2009: 76). The company describes the peasant economy of the California municipality as "relatively undeveloped" and "rudimentary." Local economic activities primarily involve "the small-scale exploitation of gold, while agriculture, cattle-raising and basic commercial activities are of lesser significance. Agriculture is carried out using traditional methods with low yields and soil deterioration over time"(Greystar, 2009: 79). Indeed, despite its scornful view of the unproductive "traditional" activities in the area, Greystar admits that locals are not destroying the region's ecology. Small-scale peasant

production in Colombia has actually been found to preserve soil quality—mineral levels and micro-bacterial balance—through the production of a variety of local species and crop rotation (Forero Álvarez, 1999: 230). Water quality tests from streams, tributaries and rivers in the area show little evidence of contamination at present, “despite the strong presence of artisanal mining in the area” (Greystar, 2009: 37). In contrast, the company expects to remove 750 megatonnes of rock (that is 395, 173, 617 square metres) process it with toxic chemicals and dump it in the Mongora valley, 5-10 km away (*Ibid*, 14-16). Greystar recognizes that the Angostura project will incite the economic impoverishment of locals in the towns of California, Vetás and Suratá. It even mentions that the state suppression of artisanal mining, coupled with the end of agriculture will result in the destruction of regional geographic-based social-networks and trading activities between communities. For those remaining in the area, they will face an influx of migrant workers and challenges related to the unequal distribution of mineral royalties (Greystar, 2009: 328). However, with a uniquely capitalist optimism that can turn destruction into opportunity and nature into profits, the company considers a positive impact for California will be generated by royalties for the national government and increasing commercial activity in the region which will integrate the towns into the wider national economy (Greystar, 2009: 328-329).

Consistent with the discourse of corporate social responsibility, Greystar claims to be promoting sustainable development in the area by spending US \$200,000 per year on local schools, roads, reforestation, paint-jobs, and a dental clinic and has made public relations efforts to win support for its project from the local Catholic Church and women’s groups (Jaimes D., 2009). Angostura will generate jobs, but these will not necessarily benefit the residents of California and Vetás. In 2002, when Greystar was selling to investors Alvaro Uribe’s offer to retake California from the FARC and ELN and Angostura from artisanal miners with military force, the company claimed that its plans would generate 1000 direct jobs and indirectly create as many as 4000 jobs through local economic development (Business News Americas, 2002). By 2009, the company estimated that only 554 jobs would be generated (Greystar, 2009: 38). Further, a camp was to be built 25 km from the main plant with barracks for 40 soldiers (Greystar, 2009: 316). Greystar estimates its total labour costs over the life of the mine at

US \$124.6 million which works out to about US \$16.3 per oz of gold (Greystar, 2009: 52). Greystar calculates no tax payments other than a 3.5 per cent royalty rate on the value of the finished metals, payable to the Colombian government. The total revenue the Colombian state can expect out of the Angostura project for the 15-year life of the mine is US \$171 million, while the company hopes to generate US \$4.885 billion (Greystar, 2009: 53-54). Not surprising then, that throughout the period Greystar has been operating in Santander, strikes, roadblocks, marches and protests have been organized by social movements in Santander against infrastructure projects planned by the state in alliance with capital (CINEP, 2009).

**Figure 3: Popular Protest Actions - Strikes, Roadblocks, Marches in Santander (1994-2008)**



Source: Calculated from CINEP database on the activities of social movements in Colombia (CINEP, 2009)

**AngloGold Ashanti and La Colosa in Cajamarca**

AngloGold Ashanti is one of the world’s largest gold producers, with the bulk of its production from deep underground

mines in South Africa, Ghana and Mali and smaller operations in Brazil, Tanzania, the U.S., Guinea, Argentina and Namibia. Exploration for gold is underway in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Australia, China, Russia and the Philippines (AngloGold Ashanti, 2008a: 4). The company employs over 60 000 people worldwide and had estimated gold reserves of 73.1 million ounces with a capital expenditure of US \$1.059 billion in 2007 (*Ibid*). AngloGold Ashanti is primarily interested in greenfield expansion in Colombia where it acquires potentially productive assets from junior companies (worth less than US \$4 million) or small mining concession-holders, explores their productive potential, and sells off those which do not meet its expectations for large volume production (*Ibid*: i). From 2000 to 2003, AngloGold Ashanti, invested US \$3.6 million in Colombia. With promises of state-security, the company invested a further US \$80 million in exploration, sample drilling and property acquisition with joint-venture partners Glencore, B2Gold Corp and Colombian Mineros S.A. between 2004 and 2007. Mineros S.A. is one of the 15 biggest companies on the Colombian stock exchange and the largest mining firm with a market capitalization of US \$2.5 billion. According to recent financial statements, Mineros S.A. produced 2.5 tonnes of gold in 2008, up from 2007 when a labour conflict stopped work for 70 days (Mineros, S.A. 2009: 4). It has a numerically small, but symbolically important, 1600 shares in AngloGold Ashanti (Mineros S.A. 2008: 32). The company owns 94 per cent of its operations but seeks FDI to expand its existing mines in Colombia and hopes to expand outward to other Latin American markets (Mineros, S.A., 2009: 4). Attracting FDI will help finance expansion while its own accumulated capital is invested in potentially more productive companies, including strategic partners like AngloGold Ashanti.

AngloGold Ashanti has two major drilling sites in Colombia. Gramalote, in the Department of North Santander, is a joint-venture with B2Gold Corp in Antioquia, and contains an estimated 1.591 million ounces of gold (AngloGold Ashanti, 2008a: 7). La Colosa is located in the Municipality of Cajamarca in the Department of Tolima and is projected to produce 12.9 million ounces (*Ibid*: 8). AngloGold Ashanti and its subsidiaries originally applied for mining concessions on a total of 13 million ha, but following exploration work, reduced the extent of claims to 3.7 million ha, with 2 million ha to be operated by AngloGold Ashanti and the rest by the joint-

venture partners (*Ibid*: 2). This 3.7 million ha, or 37000 square km, amounts to the equivalent of 6 per cent of Colombian forests and 3.2 per cent of Colombia's total territory. While the company claims to be gun-shy about staking claims in violently contested areas, Mark Curtis (2007) in the *Guardian* of the UK reports that AngloGold Ashanti acquired the disputed mining concessions in the south of Bolívar from Conquistador Mines Ltd, thereby directly benefitting from the human rights abuses by the army and paramilitary forces to forcibly displace farmers and artisanal miners in the region. The Cajamarca municipality where La Colosa is located has been highly contested in military terms. Between 1989 and 2009 there were six acts of war involving the AUC, 17 involving the National Army, 13 involving the FARC, seven involving the National Police and seven involving other paramilitary organizations (CINEP, 2009). Both the AUC and the National Army have been involved in two documented cases of politically motivated forced collective displacement in Cajamarca (CINEP, 2009).

In AngloGold Ashanti Colombia's 2008 annual report, CEO Chris Lodder claims that "it was never the intention to displace artisanal or informal miners and indeed this has not occurred. On the contrary, AngloGold Ashanti has assisted in legalising over 50 small miners and mining co-operatives or associations throughout the country and no conditions were attached to providing this assistance" (2008a: 1). The company's stated aim is to legalize all artisanal claims to clarify ownership and mineral exploitation rights: "AngloGold Ashanti's view is one that permits co-existence and promotes the development of orderly, viable small-scale mining sectors in collaboration with host communities and governments as a *quid pro quo* for respecting the security of the operations" (*Ibid*: 14). Using the mining code and mining policy framework, the company buys out existing small-scale operations on sites that interest it, while assisting artisanal miners' legalize claims for which the company has no interest at present, but which, if formalized, could be legally reacquired in the future (*Ibid*: 15). In this manner, AngloGold uses legislation and the state security forces to assist in accumulating mining concessions in artisanal mining zones, formally subsuming producers to capital.

On its relation to the state, the company hires state security forces on a fee for service basis to guarantee the security of its operations in the municipality of Cajamarca (AngloGold

Ashanti, 2008a: 3,12). This in itself is problematic, considering that Cajamarca has been the site of alleged cases of “false positives,” an ongoing scandal plaguing the Colombian armed forces in the Uribe era, whereby the army kills civilians and dresses them up as FARC guerrillas (CINEP, 2009). Constanza Veira reports from Cajamarca that the region has been the focus of struggles over land. When the FARC pulled out in 2003, paramilitaries and the army made their presence felt. In March 2003, seven peasants and two rural trade unionists were tortured and dismembered by AUC paramilitaries reportedly in radio communication with the army, while 16 other people went missing; subsequently, in August 2003, a leftist mayoral candidate, a former mayor, two librarians, teachers, shop-keepers and students in Cajamarca were arrested by the army after participating in protests against MNCs, land concentration, rural poverty and the massacre of civilians (Veira, 2004).

Since it began operations, AngloGold Ashanti has faced fierce opposition from social movements in Cajamarca, local left-wing politicians, farmers, environmental protection groups, *Polo Democrático Alternativo* (The Alternative Democratic Pole),<sup>5</sup> Liberal Congressional representatives, the Colombian Ministry for the Environment and the Colombian courts (Martinez, 2009). In 2008, in response to injunctions put forth by CORTOLIMA (*Corporación Autónoma Regional Tolima*), the Departmental regulatory agency, plans to continue with exploratory drilling at La Colosa were halted. Attorney General Edgardo Maya ordered the Minister of the Environment, Juan Lozano, to refuse AngloGold Ashanti permission to continue operations on lands classified as natural reserve (Business News America, 2008a). Despite popular resistance and institutional opposition by progressive elements of the state and justice system, AngloGold Ashanti CEO Mark Cutifani reports being confident that permits would be granted after he met with President Uribe and the Minister of Mines and Energy, Hernán Martínez, in March, 2009 (Macharia, 2009; Piraján Forero, 2009b). Cutifani was given more reason for optimism when Uribe appointed Carlos Costa Posada, a World Bank technocrat, to replace Lozano as Minister of the Environment, Housing and Territorial Development, a move lauded by Rudolf Hommes, former Minister of Home Affairs under President Gaviria and a firm promoter of FDI (Hommes, 2009). Subsequently, in May 2009, the ministry approved the removal of an initial 6.39 ha from reserve status so that mineral exploration



in Cajamarca could go ahead (Piraján Forero, 2009a). AngloGold Ashanti's environmental impact report, which asks for the removal of the rest of the concession site from environmental reserve status, was still before the ministry as of 2009, but the company, seeing this as a formality, planned to begin exploratory drilling in 2010 (Piraján Forero, 2009c). It appears that despite democratic opposition, the state executive and economic elite are determined to push through the mega-project: construction is already set to begin on a tunnel and highway that would link La Colosa to a transportation network from Bogotá to the coastal port of Buenaventura City (Business News Americas, 2008b). As AngloGold Ashanti waits for approval to recommence its operations, the army stands guard at La Colosa (Martinez, 2009).

## Conclusion

In the Spanish colonial period, the search for gold and forced labour created socio-territorial spaces of accumulation connected to regional, transatlantic and imperial centres of power (Colmenares, 1975). Post-independence, Colombian firms looked to capitalist modernization to develop gold deposits, while combined modes of artisanal mining production and subsistence agriculture grew alongside cultural *mestizajes*. Modern Colombia's capitalist and state class has offered MNCs access to Colombia's natural resources in exchange for foreign investment and military assistance to help further project capitalist class power and impose central-state authority over and against small producers. These alliances are intended to intensify capitalist exploitation of producers while deflecting the frictions generated in localized class struggles over production to socio-spatial terrains of accumulation whose centres of power transcend national boundaries. These transnationalized spaces of accumulation are created by military force and threaten destruction to people in communities who have managed to retain partial access to the means of production within capitalist modernization.

Despite the recent wave of violence against rural producers and their communities in the neoliberal era, the high levels of social struggle maintained in Santander and Tolima aim to stop further armed interventions against the civilian population (Delgado, 2009; Garcia et al., 2009). Nevertheless, forced displacement of civilians for the development of mega-projects continues, revealing the nature of the "mining revolution" and its ends: the consolidation of

capitalist transformation and the extension of capitalist class power into the mining sector.

“In the history of primitive accumulation, all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capitalist class in the course of its formation; but this is true above all for those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour-market as free and rightless proletarians (Marx, 1976: 876).”

The intensification of radical opposition from small-scale and artisanal miners, labour unions, students, women’s groups, journalists, revolutionary movements, opposition political parties and municipal governments has delayed the development of La Colosa for the time being. Artisanal miners and their organic political organizations have foreseen what power hungry and imperial minded politicians ignore: future generations will look upon the open-pits where villages and mountain eco-systems once stood and wonder whether modernization was worth the scale of environmental and cultural destruction.

## Endnotes

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2. The size, potency and even the political and ideological character of the most prominent Guerrilla armies in Colombia is disputed. While state sources estimate the Marxist-Leninist FARC-EP, in combat since 1964, has fewer than 8,000 combatants, sociological research has put that figure as high as 35,000 in 2008 and the FARC were operating in almost all departments of the country. For a full discussion of the political and methodological

issues involved in estimating the size of the FARC-EP's fighting force, see Brittain 2010, pp 16-25. The ELN also formed in 1964 is a smaller force of perhaps 5000 which has been influenced by Marxist theory, Cuban revolutionary practice and Liberation Theology (Torres, 1971). They are most active in the Northeast of Colombia (Holmes et al, 2006). Other groups include the *Ejercito de Liberacion Popular* (Popular Liberation Army) which has a handful of members who refused to demobilize along with many of their colleagues in 1991.

3. Minercol was the state-entity responsible for administrating the extraction of coal and mineral resources (including gold, silver, platinum, nickel and emeralds) and was ordered privatized in 2004 by the government of Alvaro Uribe Vélez.
4. Formed in 1997 and supposedly demobilized in 2006, the AUC is an umbrella group comprised of regionally-based right-wing paramilitary organizations formed by landlords and narcotics barons to combat left-wing guerrillas and may have had between 15000 and 20000 combatants (Holmes et al., 2006).
5. *Polo Democratico Alternativo* is a social-democratic political party representing the left-wing opposition to the governments of Alvaro Uribe Vélez and Juan Manuel Santos.

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