Translation:
https://www.jujuydice.com.ar/noticias/jujuy-3/comunidades-de-salinas-y-laguna-de-guayatayoc-resisten-la-embestida-estatal-y-empresarial-para-explorar-y-explotar-litio-52949

Communities of Salinas and Laguna de Guayatayoc resist the assault to exploit lithium by taking their water

The environmental workshops in Alfarcito end today, intense days of training and analysis of strategies to defend the territories and deepen the discussion on the energy transition from the environmental, legal, social, economic and political points of view.

The indigenous communities of the Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc basin, around 33 in total, are defending their territory and natural resources, rejecting lithium mining and calling for compliance with indigenous and environmental rights in Jujuy. They are holding workshops in the town of Alfarcito together with notable environmentalists who support the communities of Salinas and are accompanying the struggle in defence of water.

Although Las Salinas was chosen as one of the 7 Natural Wonders of Argentina, (this year marks the 20th anniversary of the UNESCO declaration of the Humahuaca Gorge as a World Heritage Site), the government of Jujuy is advancing with lithium projects affecting native communities and natural resources.

The communities are concerned about the progress of the government led by Gerardo Morales with the exploitation of lithium. There are 38 mining projects in the province, said lawyer Alicia Chalabe, a community representative, explaining that access to information is difficult and that the information was obtained after judicial presentations.

In November 2022, the state company Jujuy Energía y Minería (Jemse) announced a national and international call for bids for seven areas, including Quebraleña, Abralaite, Rinconadillas, Alfarcito, Agua de Castilla, among others. In this sense, Chalabe emphasised that "we found out about the bidding process in the newspapers and we filed a new appeal in the courts".

The conflict in Salinas has been in court for over 11 years, where the communities of Jujuy and Salta asked the Supreme Court of Justice for the implementation of indigenous rights that are not being fulfilled, such as the right to free, prior and informed consultation in Jujuy. In previous years, the United Nations Rapporteur denounced the situation of the communities in Jujuy and Salta.

Faced with this panorama and the exploitation of lithium, there is much concern on the part of the communities, mainly because of the amount of fresh water use and the consequences of contamination and drought in the indigenous territories.

For this reason, environmental professionals together with the communities organised two intense days in Alfarcito, 170 km from the capital of Jujuy, to discuss strategies, eco-policies, and to analyse the legal and social tools that assist the communities in the face of the change in the productive matrix that the government of the province is mainly promoting.

Morales divides the communities

In response to this event, the Gerardo Morales government organised a meeting between the Minister of Human Rights and Indigenous Peoples of the province, Natailia Sarapura, and the commissioner of El Moreno, a town in the salt flats. This strategy of dividing and co-opting wills is a constant in the Cambiemos government, which is why it seeks to confront the communities to achieve objectives that go against the indigenous peoples.

However, the government, through the CFI and Jemse, has also offered projects to the communities in mid-2022. Thus, the communities warned that the offers of services from third parties were meant to implicitly attend to mining projects. These projects are unconsulted and rejected by the communities.

Warning call

At a press conference at UTHGRA, the Colectivo de Acción por la Justicia Ecosocial (CAJE), the international community Aerocene, the Multisectorial contra el tarifazo, announced the workshops and listened to the voices of community members from these areas and other localities who warn of the Morales government's abuse of indigenous territories with mining projects, mainly landfill projects in Abra Pampa, which affect the future of these territories.

Verónica Chávez, president of the Tres Pozos Sanctuary Community said that "we are asking for compliance with Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), of constitutional rank, which establishes free, prior and informed consultation before projects begin; but there is no will on the part of the provincial government", she asserted.

Meanwhile, Maristella Svampa, sociologist, environmentalist, researcher and member of CAJE said that it is necessary to discuss "what we mean by energy transition, there is no single conception of transition. We also consider that the energy transition that is being sought to be implemented or imposed is a corporate and neo-colonial transition that only seeks economic benefits and to guarantee the transition of the countries of the North. It destroys fragile eco-systems such as the salt flats in order to find lithium for export, and ignores the rights of the people. We propose another vision of the energy transition that is integral, which implies understanding the organisation not only as a replacement of fossil fuels with clean energy, but also to rethink an energy system in a democratic way and to rethink the relationship with nature", she said.

From an environmentalist perspective, she pointed out that "we have seen that from the pandemic onwards, this corporate logic of insisting on the sacrifice of territories in the name of an energy transition that benefits a few, continues to destroy the planet has intensified".

She also raised the point: "we have to build a roadmap taking into account the message of the communities who have always thought of territory in connection with nature. Just as committed and valuable, art also delivers this message, so does committed literature, and critical law, and there we see a series of narratives that seek to destroy the hegemonic common sense that they want to impose on us, which unfortunately brings more destruction and is not the solution to the climate crisis", in other words, an interdisciplinary debate to address the concept of energy transition.

Deepening the discussion on lithium

It is the cultural battle that society must engage in, "It is the cultural battle because we insist that people know very little about these issues and believe that extracting lithium is fine. So, it is a complex problem that has to be seen from different perspectives, and as we can see here, it is clear that the corporations are taking everything, that the regulatory framework is a framework of dispossession and plundering, and that the communities are not consulted. Other communities do not agree, and we can see this in Salinas Grandes. We are consuming a lot of water that we require for life and the economy that sustains the communities. It is a lot and all of this is ignored. It is important for me to make this issue visible, in Argentina the space for environmentalism is growing and several issues have been incorporated, not only the mega-mining, but the defence of wetlands and the demand for this law, and we have to discuss lithium," she said.

"In this country we feel that we are moving backwards, not forwards in the recognition of environmental rights and indigenous peoples."

As for the Morales administration, she stressed that "we believe that there is a power that hinders the possibility of discussion and blocks the independence of powers and systematically ignores the rights of indigenous peoples. We are facing an unconstitutional constitutional reform that seeks to ignore the rights of indigenous peoples when it comes to dealing with projects that involve their territories, and this is very serious. This is a step backwards," she said.

"This is a moment and I insist that a sacrifice zone is being extended and the inequalities are ethnic, gender, social, and environmental. It is time to discuss these issues in a province in which everything tends to be encapsulated and to close off any possibility of democratisation of decisions".