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Coal Mining and Social Conflicts in Colombia

The struggle about natural resources and land conflicts are among the root causes of a civil war that has been going on for 60 years now. Behind this war, there are multinational corporations who are raking in billions in profits. They let right-wing paramilitaries do the dirty work on the spot. The boundaries between the state police and the military are unclear and intransparent.

The exploitation of coal leads to grave violations of human rights. The population in the area is systematically and forcefully evicted from their land.



Paramilitaries in a Colombian village



Coal Mining Area in Colombia

The open-cast coal mines cuts huge miles-long lanes in Colombia's primary forests. Drinking water is contaminated because it is used for cleaning coal.

All this has led to violent protests and resistance in Columbia. In 2012, many open-ended strikes took place in the region where coal is exploited.

Mine workers and villagers were blocking the tracks of the main traffic ways for coal. They were also demonstrating together against the relocation of the Rio Rancheria that is scheduled to be 26km long.

The river is a fundamental base of people's livelihoods and is supposed to yield to the exploitation of coal.

In this struggle, especially trade unionists are increasingly threatened in recent times, about 40 trade unionists got murdered in Colombia each year, more than in any other country.

The Colombian government is doing everything to prevent news about evictions, environmental pollution or protests become public. In order to achieve this, they are pulling out all the stops: Youtube-videos are systematically deleted a few hours after uploading. International media cannot move freely. Critical Colombian journalists are drastically suppressed and threatened.

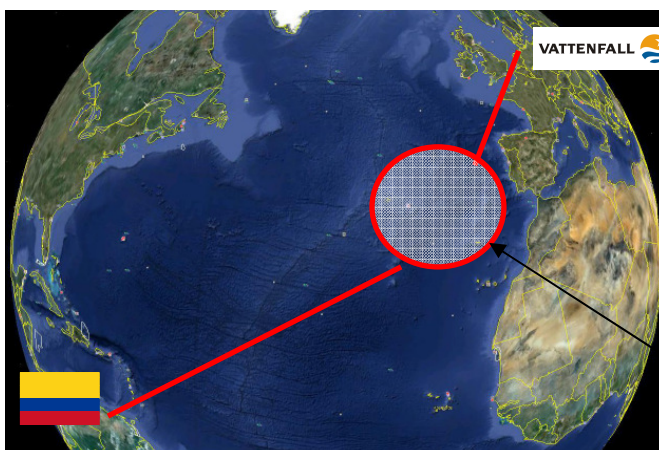


July 2012: Derailed Coal Train

Structure and Procedures of Coal Trade

The disastrous consequences of coal mining rarely reach the public eye in Germany. It is hardly known where exactly the energy corporations obtain the coal for their power plants. A duty of information for the corporations does not exist.

Vattenfall does not communicate openly: 'We have received deliveries of coal from El Cerrejón (Colombia), at least in the past', says press officer Steffen Herrmann, "for reasons of competition we cannot make public from which mining areas we obtain coal for certain power plants, including Moorburg (in Hamburg)."



However, on a visitor tour at the Moorburg building site, you get a more straight-forward answer: 'A large part of the coal will come from Colombia. It is 'good and cheap – just the right thing for Moorburg'

Moreover they say there will be a clever system of loaded stand-by freight ships on the Atlantic Ocean, to deliver coal to Moorburg 'just in time'.

The shipping company first buys the coal with the mining TNC in Colombia, then they signal readiness to deliver to customers, such as Vattenfall. Only when the freight ship is already waiting on the Atlantic Ocean, the whole deal is negotiated by Vattenfall. This contributes to an additional opaqueness of the coal's origin.

Power Plant Moorburg is supposed to be connected to the grid in the beginning of 2014



May 2012: Moorburg after 5 years of building work

Then it would emit up to 9 million tons of CO₂ per year, i.e. more than the Latin American country Bolivia emits altogether. Vattenfall has always depicted Moorburg as a power plant 'of and for Hamburg'.

Yet regarding the fast expansion of wind power we cannot talk about a necessity for Hamburg's electricity supply.

The same is true for district heating. Here the massive protest of affected locals and activists was able to prevent the so-called "Moorburgtrasse" (a huge hot water pipe from the power plant to the citycenter)

The consequences for Vattenfall are considerable: Without the generation of heat energy, Moorburg loses the status of the so-called 'preferential production' (by German law).

Now the power plant has to be turned down when the renewables produce sufficient electricity. Therefore Vattenfall can only expect less than half of the production that was originally scheduled, or (another possibility) to export the current.

It was also possible to prevent the city's immediate dependency of heat generated by the coal-fired power plant. Meanwhile, Vattenfall itself admits in public that 'Moorburg was a mistake from today's perspective' but now 'unfortunately there is no way back'.

In the city, Vattenfall can rely on a strong political lobby. Primarily, the powerful Senator for Economics, Horch, but also Mayor Scholz, the Senator for Environment Blankau and even the trade unions support the completely irresponsible and anachronistic project.

Fact is: whole neighbourhoods, such as Wilhelmsburg or Moorburg, would be considerably affected by pollution with particle matters and nitrogen oxides, if the power plant started working. On top of that, there would be fatal ecological consequences for the area Süderelbe which is highly affected by pollution anyways. And of course, the climate killer would emit huge amounts of CO₂.



April 2011: In front of Hamburg's city hall: "Vattenfall out"

August 2008: Attempted occupation of the building site



There have been many actions of protest and resistance against Moorburg in the past years.

The most spectacular action so far has been the attempt of ca. 800 activists to occupy the building site, which was prevented by a massive police force and water canons.

Apart from that, a clear majority of people in Hamburg are against the coal-fired power plant. For good reasons -However, we have never been asked.

Climate Change ... Colombia... Moorburg... Protest...

The poorest of the poor are most affected by the consequences of climate change. In the last six months, the world market prices for wheat have increased by 50 %, prices for corn even by 70%. Main causes are the huge harvest losses predicted for 2012, which are due to grave heat waves and droughts in many growing areas.

Extreme weather conditions have increased significantly

The polar caps are melting much faster than expected. Also, glaciers in the Himalaya and in the Andes, such as in Colombia, are melting, yet billions of people depend on them for their fresh water supply. Like many other coastal regions in the world, Colombia is threatened by floodings and a rising sea level.

Also here in Hamburg, the likelihood for a devastating storm flood has increased. Therefore new residential areas in neighbourhoods near the Elbe are built 10 meters higher than usual. And: no other high mountain areas are melting faster than the high Andes. Ironically, the electricity supply of the country depends so far on rivers fed by Andean glaciers – coal production is destined for the export, at least more than 90 percent of it. Soon it is supposed to come to Hamburg, too, with huge freight ships of the Panamax type. Then the coal-fired power plant is further heating up the climate – just to make Vattenfall richer.

No other coal-fired power plant has proved more controversial in the last years. Because of the perseverant work of local citizen initiatives, but also because Moorburg remains such a bone of contention, up to this day 11 of 15 scheduled coal-fired power plant in Northern Germany were given up or prevented.

This shows: protest and resistance is effective!

Coal-fired power plants have to be turned off instead of turned on!



Mass freight ship of the Panamax type