A fight to save the Amazon Rainforest

by Joanna Cabello
Thursday, 18 June 2009

After another round of climate negotiations in Bonn, Germany, it is clear that the economic powers are pushing for a treaty that will do better in reinforcing the neoliberal agenda than mitigating global warming. While these technical and misleading climate jargon discourses happen at the global level, actions of local resistance, like the Indigenous struggle in Peru against polluting industries inside their territories, can also make us remember what dealing with climate change is really about. After all, keeping the fossil fuels in the ground is and should be the main demand for reaching the structural change needed for climate justice.

Most people relate Brazil with the Amazon and Peru with the Andes. Yet, more than half of Peruâ€™s territory is covered with rainforest, which is at the same time, home of 65 ethnic groups, 14 linguistic families and diverse ways of living. Sadly, it has become also the home of intense oil, mining and gas extraction. This occupation with concessions given by the current Alan Garciaâ€™s government and its private â€˜partnersâ€™ is taking place as if no person lived there. Severe water ar soil pollution, local health problems and overlapping of many of the private concessions with natural protected areas, indigenous territories and areas inhabited by tribes living in voluntary isolation, are now common problems that those people have to confront in order to survive.

For more than two months, Indigenous Peoples in Peru are carrying out an â€˜indefinite strikeâ€™ to demand the abolishment o some legislative decrees that undermine their land and water rights. These decrees were approved without their prior consultation, as is requested in the 169 ILO Convention that Peru had subscribed to, for the implementation of the free trade agreement with the US. This means that more rainforest land would be open for private corporations, which as the governmentâ€™s violent military reaction against the Indigenous movement demonstrated, framed as â€˜national interestâ€™. However, Indigenous Peoples at the Amazon have always defended their territories, they were conquered neither by the Inca Empire nor by the Spanish colonizers, and now they are facing a new form of colonization. They are not only fighting for their rights, but they are also fighting to defend the Amazon rainforest. They are fighting for all of us.

The Amazon rainforest contains one of the greatest biological and cultural diversity, and generates an estimated of 20% of the worlds fresh water. It is crucial for maintaining the climate by regulating atmospheric gases and stabilizing rainfall, protect against desertification, and provide numerous other ecological functions. Despite that, within an intense neoliberal and colonialist agenda, the area designated for oil and gas concessions has increased since 2005 from around 15% to more than 70%, and the government wants more. In April 2009, PeruPetro, the countryâ€™s national oil licensing agency, signed contracts with international oil companies for 15 Amazonian blocks. The oil extraction process releases toxic drilling by-products into local rivers, and broken pipelines and leakage result in oil spillage. In addition, the construction of roads and oil sites opens lands to colonists and land developers.

The neoliberal agenda, initiated in Peru during the Fujimori era, reinforced by Alejandro Toledo, and now deeply intensified by Alan Garcia, has failed to deal -among many other things, with the complexities of the Amazon. This occidental development model is creating societies in perpetual tension with nature, fed by intense extraction, production, consumption, faster and cheaper, and as a result, the earth balance has been inevitably disrupted. This unsustainable culture oppresses those outside the market, which preserve a cosmovision without political parties or

elections but a social and politic organization based on the concept of community. The leader or â€˜Apuâ€™ does not decide. It is the collective that takes the task of decision-making.

But this not only involves the Peruvian government. Oil and gas extraction often go hand in hand with corruption. Last year, audio recordings evidenced the level of fraud inside the GarcÃ-a government for fossil fuel concessions. The recordings show PeruPetro administration, the national oil licensing agency, giving away oil rights in natural reserves and indigenous territories.

Yet, despite the fortune made from oil and gas for only a hand full of actors, state presence is almost non-existent for the Indigenous communities, who are bearing the real burden of national and international fossil fuels consumption. In this regard, according to a report from the Derecho, Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (DAR) organization, there are 24 plots of hydrocarbon extraction overlapping hundreds of Indigenous communities. For instance, the Spanish multinational Repsol YPF and the Brazilian company PetrobrÃ¡s are operating over two Communal Matsiguenga Reserves; the US company Hunt Oil and the Burlington company are extracting over a Communal Amarakaeri Reserve and the Reserved Area of

Pucacuro respectively; among many more. The intense and continuous investment in such dirty industries at the Amazon basin are a complete contradiction to what the investor countries and the Peruvian government should be doing to mitigate the current climate crisis.

Ironically, the global climate negotiations to expand the carbon market and to insert the rainforest in this market-based scheme are also threatening the sustainable ways of living of the Indigenous Peoples. Their unsafe land rights could make them easily displaced and the governments and corporations are taking advantage of this situation. But the fact is that displacing Indigenous Peoples is not only going against their rights and affecting the Amazon, but also means the disappearance of the few left ways of living in harmony with nature, which is invaluable for understanding a transition to a non-carbon economy structure. At a time when scientists have emphasized the importance of the Amazon as the vanguard against catastrophic climate change, the government of Peru has to stop selling off the forest to fossil fuel extraction.

The subject in question is, on more time, the concept of development itself within a very fragmented country. While the elites look at development as more growth in terms of production and consumption along with occidental life-styles, the Andean and Amazonian peoples are based on a community logic of distribution. However, Peru is just one of the many countries now in conflict with its Indigenous Peoples over natural resources. Different parts of Africa, Latin America, Asia and North America are having conflicts over land rights, which is a clear manifestation of the unsustainable extractive path of capitalism for the benefit of some.

The Amazon is at great risk. Oil and gas companies working in the rainforest have much more responsibility in regards to climate change. Their operations contribute to local processes of deforestation through the construction of roads, pipelines, and oil platforms; to pollution from oil extraction and transportation; and to an excessive accumulation of greenhouse gases by every barrel of produced oil that is being transferred into the atmosphere. Companies and governments on the North have a climate debt with the global south. Now is the time to leave the fossil fuels in the ground and invest in appropriate energy- efficiency and safe, clean and community-led renewable energy.

Joanna Cabello is a researcher with Carbon Trade Watch, a project of the Transnational Institute.

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