

Ecuador's Indigenous movement calls for an international movement against extractive industries

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The main Indigenous organisation in Ecuador, CONAIE, alongside the National Antimining Front (FNA), has adopted a proposal to begin to build a broad international front against mining and other extractive industries. It was one of 14 proposals made by the FNA's II National Gathering, and comes as the movement has scored a significant victory against a Canadian mining company.

Over 800 delegates from 77 Indigenous and other organisations from across Ecuador's three regions (Amazonia, Highlands and Coast) registered for the gathering on 22 March. The previous week had seen a new outbreak of police violence and community resistance at Palo Quemado in the central highlands, around a copper mining project being developed by Atico Mining Corporation, based in Canada. At least 20 members of the community were wounded and 70 were indicted, after first a group of paramilitaries and then 500 police shock troops stormed in firing tear gas and grapeshot.

They were trying to stop the community from blocking access for the mining company, which in tandem with the government was planning to hold an "environmental consultation" on 27 March, as a way of clearing the way to beginning work on the mine.

Not surprisingly, this became a central focus of the FNA's meeting, and it added a new note of militancy to the often festive gathering. A series of actions in solidarity with Palo Quemado were among the final resolutions. Three days later, there was a breakthrough. A local judge ordered the environmental consultation to be suspended because, as the community and the Indigenous movement had been arguing, not all the steps required by the Constitution had been completed. He called for a new hearing on the case for 2 April. He also ordered all non-essential military and police forces to be withdrawn from the area. However, at the time of writing there were reports of more soldiers being deployed to Palo Quemado and a new round of confrontations, with more people wounded.

The central aim of the II National Gathering was to build on the work done over the last three years by the FNA to link the strength of the Indigenous movement to that of other peasant and social movements, in a combined resistance to the destruction wrought on communities and the environment by the oil and mining industries. The immediate target was the new government of President Daniel Noboa, and his not altogether surprising turn to developing copper and gold mining on a mega scale.

Noboa is the son of one of the Ecuador's richest banana magnates. He won the presidential election last year by presenting himself as a young and modern, new face, and at least in part by coming out, just weeks before the poll, in favour of a campaign that was going viral among Ecuadorean youth, to vote yes in a referendum to leave the oil in the ground under the Yasuni National Park. At the time,

he already indicated he would develop new mines to make up for the income lost from the Yasuní oil.

The security crisis that erupted in Ecuador at the beginning of the year – after a leading drug lord mysteriously escaped from prison – gave President Noboa the opportunity to declare a state of emergency and thereby justify the use of troops to deal with a range of ‘security’ issues. Whether or not the crisis itself was manufactured, as some of his critics suggest, the Noboa government has taken advantage of the situation to push through a series of his core neoliberal reforms, including relaxing labour laws and increasing VAT. He has also put a new emphasis on developing extractive industries, and is looking at ways of by-passing the results of the Yasuní referendum and continuing, ‘for the time being’, to drill for oil in the national park that is a biodiversity hotspot. Just two weeks before the conflict with Atico Mining in Palo Quemado burst into the headlines, Noboa was with three of his ministers in Canada for the annual meeting of the PDAC mining association, to promote Ecuador as one of the world’s most ‘attractive’ mining destinations.

All of this has led CONAIE and the FNA to conclude that international cooperation in their struggle is more important than ever. Most pressingly, there is a need for immediate expressions of solidarity with Palo Quemado and other communities resisting predatory mining on their land, and facing severe repression as a result. More strategically, as the President of CONAIE, Leonidas Iza explained in the news conference at the end of the II National Gathering, they see the need to develop as soon as possible this international network against mining and extractive industries, that can bring together all those resisiting these attacks on their communities and their environment. The details of what and how remain to be thrashed out, But the invitation is now there, from one of the most important social movements on the front lines of the struggle for our future and the planet. It is up to us the take it up, spread it, and look for ways to make it a reality.

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