

Free Trade and Climate Change Resistance: Why a people community in Oaxaca fighting against a (European) windmill farms energy project

Sunday 13 December 2009, by [CRUZ VELSQUEZ Betina](#), [MALIG Mary Louise](#), [OLIVET Cécilia](#) (Date first published: 9 December 2009).

Betina from Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Oaxaca, Mexico) joined Trade to Climate Caravan to denounce the malicious practices behind the clean-energy windmills set up in Oaxaca, which are displacing indigenous communities from their land.

As a member of the 80.000 people community in the Pacific coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Oaxaca, Mexico), BETINA CRUZ VELÁSQUEZ is part of the growing resistance against the wind farm projects set up by European (mainly Spanish) transnational corporations She is on her way to Copenhagen (COP15) from Geneva (7th WTO Ministerial) with the Trade to Climate Caravan to denounce the malicious practices behind the clean-energy windmills set up in Oaxaca, which are displacing indigenous communities from their land. While on the Caravan, she spoke to MARY LOU MALIG of Focus on the Global South and CECILIA OLIVET of Transnational Institute about the importance of corn for her culture and the struggle of her community to protect their right to farm.

How did you get involved in the struggles for social justice?

I come from a zapoteca community, with a majority of indigenous population. Our life revolves around corn. For us, corn is the main source of food, but also corn is present in most of our everyday life rituals. Corn, is, for example, the food we offer, in the form of tamal, when someone dies. Corn is also part of our collective work, when we support our friends in their harvest and they will later do the same for others. Without corn we would die. I joined the struggle to maintain our right to farm when TNCs took interest in our land to set up wind farm projects. I am now part of the Assembly in Defence of the Land and Territory of Juchitán.

What is the situation faced by your community?

When transnational corporations realised that in our land, winds can reach speeds up to 30 km per hour, they saw an opportunity to produce wind power. Most of the TNCs that arrived are from Spanish origin, such as Endesa, Union Fenosa, Preneal, Iberdrola, Acciona and Gamesa, but there are also companies from France, Switzerland, Germany and Italy. These windmill parks are part of the Plan Puebla Panama launched in 2001. The TNCs, colluding with the Mexican government, manipulated the poor, largely non-Spanish speaking indigenous people of my community into signing tenancy contracts that in practice meant giving up their lands for up to 30-years for a ridiculously low amount of money. The indigenous landowners receive 150 pesos (around 8 Euro) per hectare per year. They also receive a one-time payment of 1000 pesos (around 50 Euro) if they sign the contract. These agreements were presented to our people in Spanish when in most cases they only

speak zapoteco and cannot read Spanish. The agreements were also misleading because the companies promised that the owner could keep cultivating the land, However, the contract includes, among others, the restriction that crops that grow more than 2 meters cannot be planted (while corn can grown more than 2 meter). In contrast, the company has no restrictions in the use of the land. The contracts are for 30 years but they can be automatically renewed for another 30 years and only the company can terminate the contract.

Even when the companies are not buying the land, these leases represent a new form of feudalism. The companies are in control of thousands of hectares. For example, in the town of San Mateo del Mar, they were aiming to rent 4000 hectares, while the total land of the town is 7000 hectares. This is a complete lack of respect to our way of life. They act as if we are commodities that can be bought.

Why are you resisting a renewable energy project?

With the pretext of advancing renewable energy, big corporations are occupying our land with windmills. Agriculture, particularly corn plantations, is the essence of our region, and will be completely displaced by the wind farm projects.

The Government, as well as the companies, argued at the time that these projects would bring employment and development to the region. instead, people are losing their land and the energy produced is not destined to benefit the Mexican people. Furthermore, none of the investment stays in the country. The companies indicate they will invest \$3 billion of which 78 percent will be invested in purchasing wind turbines in Germany, Spain or Denmark. The rest of the 22% will be used to install the turbines and a mere 1 percent will come for the development of the region. Also, the development of wind power does not mean that other polluting sources of energy will be closed, such as hydroelectric plants. In fact, just the opposite, there are discussions about the installation of a new nuclear plant in Mexico.

These are the reasons why we are demanding an immediate moratorium on the wind farm projects, based on the arguments that we have not been properly consulted and the wind farm projects were realised through abusive land lease contracts obtained by the TNCs which have violated international agreements that demand local consultation for these projects.

These experiences led us to believe that we need to carefully analyse what the energy alternatives are as well as the solutions to climate change. The real solutions must be thought in an integral way. We cannot cover one whole while drilling three others at the same time.

What are your strategies of resistance?

Facing this threat, we started to organise ourselves. In my town, Juchitán, we formed an Assembly in Defence of the Land and the Territory. Then we joined other groups that reject this kind of wind farm projects and formed the Frente de Pueblos del Istmo en Defensa de la Tierra (Front of Peoples of the Isthmus in Defence of the Land). Together, we started an awareness-raising campaign in the areas where the windmill farms are based.

As part of our campaign, we organised occupations of land and legal demands to nullify the land lease contracts. Up to now, we have won around 200 cases. The companies, due to the mobilisation and the lawsuits, agreed to revoke the contracts of the landowners who presented demands against the investors, thus releasing people from these draconian contracts.

Our lands have been inherited and they are considered communal, therefore they cannot be subjected to private contracts. At the moment we are starting to put together an appeal to the

Agrarian Tribunal asking to respect communal lands and demanding that the companies get out of our territories. This will be a tough battle since the Government of Oaxaca is known for defending the corporations and terrorising the communities.

What do you think of the market-based solutions being presented to solve the climate crisis?

The windmill farms in Mexico have been presented as part of the so-called Clean Development Mechanism and are receiving subsidies under this scheme. However, the fight against climate change cannot be done by mercantilising our lives, since this has been one of the root causes of climate change in the first place. In order to solve the climate crisis, the projects for renewable energy, either wind power, solar, geothermic among others, cannot be seen as business.

Furthermore, to achieve real solutions to the climate crisis, it is not enough to start producing renewable energy. We also need to address the excesses in energy consumption, particularly in the North. We are here in Paris for example and the excess in energy consumption is evident. We cannot continue with energy production to cover these excesses at the expense of using the land meant for cultivating our food.

What solutions do you propose to solve the climate crisis?

We have to unite in the fight against climate change for real solutions. It is not a fight North vs South, or East vs West, but a fight against transnational corporations and the international financial institutions who are benefiting from the climate crisis.

In our communities, we do not have high levels of energy consumption and that does not mean we do not live well, because we do. So the calls for more energy production are false. But, even if there is a need for new sources of renewable energy such as wind power, we have to make sure that it is based on the needs of the people and not imposed by the needs of the market and TNCs.

Why are you on the Caravan and what do you expect from Copenhagen?

I joined the Trade to Climate Caravan to create awareness about the situation we are living through and to denounce the false green energy solutions that are being imposed on us. We have been accused of not wanting development, without understanding that what we want is a different kind of development than the one that is being imposed upon us.

I hope that the solutions to climate change are bottom up, built from the experiences of a global movement of the excluded and affected by climate change. I do not have hopes in Copenhagen, but in the international movement that fights for real solutions.

P.S.

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