

# Labour Union in Colombia Battles Canadian Oil Company: Pacific Rubiales is Linked to Attacks on Union Activists

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*In May 2012, the third edition of my report Profiting from Repression: Canadian Investment in and Trade with Colombia was published and released by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) in Ottawa. The report links ten Canadian companies in Colombia to the genocide of indigenous Colombians, to complicity in eight murders and one attempted murder, to other significant military/paramilitary repression, to large-scale displacement, and to environmental destruction on a massive scale, as well as to union-busting, strike-breaking, and worker exploitation.*

These corporations are the four oil companies Talisman, Gran Tierra, Pacific Rubiales, and Petrominerales, and the six mining companies Gran Colombia Gold, Eco Oro Minerals, Cosigo Resources, B2Gold, Midasco Capital, and Antioquia Gold. Never before have Canadian companies in Colombia been so destructive. They are now open to criminal charges of genocide, murder, complicity in murder, environmental damage, displacement of indigenous populations, and the violation of labour rights.

Toronto-based Pacific Rubiales (PR) is the leading private oil and gas company in Colombia and produces 40% of the country's oil. The company's major producing properties are the Rubiales, Piriri and Quifa oil fields in Colombia's Llanos Basin which is located in Meta department in the center of the country. Rubiales is the largest oil field in Colombia. My report linked Pacific Rubiales to paramilitaries (state-affiliated death squads responsible for most of the human rights violations in Colombia), to the destruction of indigenous homes and to strike-breaking, union-busting, and related military repression.

Last month, I was part of a speakers' panel in Toronto where I had the honour of introducing Rodolfo Vecino and Cesar Loza, President and International Relations Secretary, respectively, of the Petroleum Workers' Union (USO) in Colombia. Vecino and Loza were on a speaking tour of Canada to raise awareness of the negative impact of Pacific Rubiales oil operations on Colombians. USO has been in the forefront of the struggle for workers' rights in Colombia, and more than 100 of its members have been killed by state death squads. More unionists are murdered in Colombia than in any other country.

I interviewed Vecino and Loza after they spoke. Both thanked me for my report, with Loza telling me "I use your report to denounce Canadian corporations in Colombia. The report confirms the negative impact of mining and energy extractive Canadian multinational corporations in Colombia." Vecino added: "I want to emphasize the importance of this type

of research which we need in Colombia to understand all the connections between different multinational corporations, and in our case particularly, the role of Pacific Rubiales.”

Q: Tell us about the background of USO.

Vecino: USO is an industrial union representing workers in the petroleum sector. We have 11,000 members nationally. Eighty per cent of our members are sub-contractors under precarious employment contracts. USO was born 90 years ago in the city of Barrancabermeja when we were struggling against a multinational corporation called Tropical Oil, a subsidiary of Standard Oil Company, a U.S. multinational.

The first aspect of our campaign was to defend national sovereignty, and we called for the nationalization of petroleum resources and the defence of workers’ rights and of their communities. These are the principles that our union is still defending. In this struggle during our history, we have carried out 22 strikes. One of our most important strikes was in 1948, and out of this was created the national petroleum company called Ecopetrol. This is a public company that we are still defending in order to ensure that it stays public.

Q: What kind of official repression has been directed at USO?

Vecino: All known repressive practices have been unleashed against our union. One hundred and eight members of our union have been killed. Many of us have often been jailed. Five hundred of our union leaders and activists have been displaced currently in Colombia. Last night (May 7), assassins fired several bullets at Rafael Rodriguez, one of our activists. Fortunately, Rafael’s life was saved by the quick reaction of his bodyguard. Rafael is today recuperating in a clinic from the emotional and psychological impact of surviving this assassination attempt.

Q: What has been USO’s experience with Pacific Rubiales?

Loza: Pacific Rubiales is responsible for violating human rights, labour rights, and indigenous rights in Colombia. This company is also destroying our environment, especially our water resources.

Vecino: Millions of barrels of water contaminated with oil are being dumped into water sources, many of which are now devoid of life. There are no fish left there. The company cannot manage the waste created by its oil production, so the contaminated water is poured onto roads, exposing people to disease.

Q: How does Pacific Rubiales treat Colombian workers?

Vecino: Currently 60% of Colombia’s oil production comes out of Meta Department (province). Pacific Rubiales (PR) is based in Meta. In July 2011, PR acted against 12,000 workers that were camped in the oil fields producing about 240,000 barrels of oil. The conditions of these workers I would characterize as living in a labour concentration camp. Their contracts were for 28 days, which are garbage contracts. These workers were paid very low wages (about the minimum) even though they were working in the petroleum industry. This low pay is insufficient to sustain a decent living, especially in an inhospitable jungle region like Meta.

These 12,000 workers had no guarantees in terms of health and safety. They had deficient

food and nutrition, and their sleeping quarters were totally inadequate. Six hundred workers were sleeping in huge tents in extremely unsanitary conditions. These workers laboured up to 18 hours a day. Such harsh working conditions led to our labour conflict with Pacific Rubiales. The company has also displaced an indigenous community in Meta, and these people now have to ask Pacific Rubiales for permission to move around in their own territory.

Q: How do Colombian security forces support Pacific Rubiales?

Vecino: All kinds of Colombian security forces are present in the Pacific Rubiales oil production area, including the army which is protecting PR's oil installations. About 5,000 members of the Military Police and riot squads are also stationed in the area. These forces have eight different contracts for security with Pacific Rubiales, and act like mercenaries at the service of the company. Any attempt by our union to exercise our labour rights of free association and organization have been attacked by these armed police and military forces.

They stop us from organizing and mobilizing the workers. In 2012, USO tried to go to the oilfields where the workers were, and the army erected a barricade to stop us from entering. Pacific Rubiales has also erected a fence to prevent USO from going to the oilfields to talk to the workers. That is why I say that the Pacific Rubiales oilfields are in effect a labour concentration camp. The riot squad is in the oil fields 24 hours a day to block our union activities. The National Police follow us and film our activists. Workers have also been arbitrarily detained by security forces which have assaulted and injured our union members during demonstrations.

Q: Tell us about the relations between Pacific Rubiales and the paramilitaries.

Vecino: We know that there is a relationship between Pacific Rubiales and the paramilitaries. There is open presence of paramilitaries in an area called Cristalinas, which adjoins the oil fields of Pacific Rubiales. A thousand families live in that area. About 400 workers there work for a company called Hocol, which is a subsidiary of Ecopetrol. All these workers and their communities have to pay a tax to the paramilitaries. We have evidence of the connections between Pacific Rubiales, the Colombian government, and the paramilitaries. Some of this evidence has been made public in judicial proceedings.

One of our offices is in Puerto Gaitan, where Pacific Rubiales is located. We had to close that office last December after one of our activists, Milton Rivas Para, was murdered there. We regard this as a political assassination, and the responsibility lies with the Colombian government and the multinational mining companies that want to crush our union. Both the government and the corporations are also associated with the paramilitaries that are present in the Puerto Gaitan area. Ironically, these paramilitary death squads call themselves the "Freedom Fighters of the Vichada Area."

Q: Tell us more about Pacific Rubiales' union-busting.

Vecino: Pacific Rubiales has joined with the Colombian state in refusing to recognize accords that we have achieved as part of collective bargaining negotiations. Pacific Rubiales threatened to fire 4,000 workers who had joined our union at the end of 2011. These workers were forced to resign from our union and provide proof that they had done so. Only then were they permitted to continue working in the oil fields. About 200 workers refused to resign from our union in spite of these threats, so they were fired and put on a blacklist.

They are still unable to find work in the petroleum industry anywhere in the country.

Q: Who are the executives of Pacific Rubiales?

Vecino: Most of the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of Pacific Rubiales were ministers in the former government of Alvaro Uribe (2002—2010), including his former ministers of foreign affairs and mining. This government was perhaps the most corrupt and one of the most criminal that Colombia has ever seen. The former functionaries of this government are today spread throughout the oil industry in CEO positions. Ronald Pantin, the CEO of Pacific Rubiales, is a Venezuelan. He was very active in the oil strike that tried to bring down the Chavez government in Venezuela and was also involved in the military coup launched against Chavez in 2002.

Q: What can Canadians do to support USO's struggle against Pacific Rubiales?

Loza: The fight against this multinational is not an easy one, and USO cannot win it singlehanded. We need solidarity in Canada as well as in Colombia, since Pacific Rubiales and many other companies operating in Colombia are based in Canada. We're asking all of Canadian civil society, labour unions, and community organizations, academics, and Members of Parliament to oppose the activities of Pacific Rubiales.

We met with the members of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) and asked them to publicly make a statement about the impact of Pacific Rubiales because OSSTF has investments in the company. We also ask for the support of Canadians for a public tribunal we are holding in Meta in Colombia on July 13, which will judge the crimes of Pacific Rubiales. We invite Canadians to attend this tribunal.

Our solidarity with Canadians will strengthen our struggle against Canadian-based multinational corporations. Together we need to demand from the Canadian and Colombian governments respect for human rights, labour rights, and for our communities and the environment. And if we become strong enough to kick these multinationals out of our country, that's what we are going to do.

***Asad Ismi** is the CCPA Monitor's international affairs correspondent. He is author of the book *Profiting from Repression: Canadian Investment in and Trade with Colombia (which contains more about Pacific Rubiales)* and the radio documentary *The Latin American Revolution*. Both are available on his website [www.asadismi.ws](http://www.asadismi.ws).*

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