

Workers Service Centre in Mancayan, Cordillera

By Mahjabeen Chowdhury

When a mining town and neighbouring farmers clash, it is important that a third party steps in to deal with a wide range of issues. That is the case in Mancayan, Cordillera, The Philippines where Le Panto Mining Company operates a gold and copper mine, and where farmers have serious environmental concerns.

The mining company has been accused of causing environmental destruction, polluting the local river and marine life, destroying flora and fauna, exploiting labour and violating community, and destroying livelihoods. There is often a heavy military presence in the community, occasionally giving rise to riots and the killing of disenfranchised workers. The military is there to protect the interest of the mining company.

The first Le Panto mining workers' strike was held in 1949. There wasn't another strike until 2003 when they sought a wage increase. In 2005, the workers went on strike again to protest entrenchment of workers. Wages were below the minimum wage, there was unlawful exploitation of the workers and violation of workers' rights.

The mining community in Mancayan has a poor infrastructure. Roads are not paved. It is difficult to use that road during six months of wet season. The only clinic in town remains closed. There is no doctor or nurse, though a midwife is available from time to time. There is no affordable high school. This is a community that stands on gold and copper, yet after almost 75 years of mining, no comprehensive socio-economic development has taken place.

The Cordillera Workers Service Centre was opened in Mancayan in 1998 to provide workers with paralegal training, education and raise awareness of their rights, and provide them with legal assistance. The training needs are identified by workers themselves.

There are 1,477 mining workers in the community; 700 are miners and the remaining are the surface workers.

Le Panto has a company-managed workers' union but, as expected, that union is not effective in protecting the workers and their community. The Workers Service Centre has helped the workers to form their own trade union, registered with the National Federation of Trade Unions. As a result, a collective bargaining agreement is being negotiated. It will be a long struggle since workers want the company to respect environmental laws and practices. They are preparing a proposal to form an environmental monitoring committee. This will not be an easy task but both the centre and the workers trade union are committed to see it included in the collective bargaining agreement.

When the mining workers are exploited, so are their families. Mining operations employ solely male workers. The Workers Service Centre engages the voices of the workers' wives. Workers' wives are often at the forefront of all activities related to workers' rights and demands. When there is a strike, the whole family is threatened with starvation. The centre is instrumental in raising emergency funds for the food aid to workers during strikes.

Mining is an accident-prone profession. On average, there is one serious accident every month. Whenever there is an accident, workers are admitted into the hospital run by Le Panto on the

mining site, which often has inadequate facilities. In most cases injured workers are sent to outside hospitals but the mining company does not cover the cost.

Children and youth often lack basic education, especially about their own poverty and the working conditions that their families face. The mining companies often turn the children and youth against their parents. Since most youth are unable to continue their education beyond elementary school, they are not exposed to healthy social interaction with other youth.

Subsistence farmers

There is also a community of subsistence farmers in Mancayan who in the past demanded that the mining operations stop. This demand was not supported by the miners since it would mark an end to their livelihoods. And mining workers' demands for better wages and benefits were not supported by the farmers. This non-cooperation between the two communities worked in favour of the mining company's exploitation of workers' rights. The company also continued to ignore environmental issues.

The Workers Service Centre brought farming and mining communities together. It educated the farmers on the plight of the mining workers and enabled the farmers to understand that their demand to stop the mining operation would leave these mining workers without jobs. Instead, the right demand is to ask the companies to respect workers rights, pay them the right wages and provide benefits.

At the same time the mining company needs to take social responsibility for the environment. While mining workers and farmers work on these fronts collectively, the Workers Service Centre is engaged in ongoing research together with other local civil society groups such as Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) in re-establishing and advocating for sustainable small scale mining.

There are about 2,500 small-scale miners in the region. There is a strong opportunity to promote 'clean gold' and 'green gold'. Even the mining workers are being educated on the option of sustainable small-scale mining. When mining workers were asked if they worry about 'open pit' commercial mining to stop as their advocacy succeeds, the answer was that they would be happy to go back to their ancestral livelihood options, which is small-scale farming and small-scale mining.

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