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LITHIUM MINING IN MEXICO

Public interest or transnational extractivism?


Lithium, like many other minerals projected to be extracted in the name of reducing global warming, are not *strategic minerals* for the energy transition. Instead, these minerals are being mined to expand the market of certain supply chains deemed by some as "green," but that represent false solutions to the global socio-environmental crisis we are facing. Far from seeking to replace or reduce its ecological footprint, these markets continue to feed ever more energy use and consumption, further entrenching the same exploitative model of resource extraction that has led to global warming in the first place.

In Mexico, the government promotes the exploitation of lithium as part of an effort to strengthen national sovereignty, justifying mining by designating lithium extraction as being in the public interest. The U.S. automotive industry, however, is driving this rush for resource extraction as it tries to better position itself up against China's dominance of the entire value chain for the manufacturing of electric vehicles. Lithium deposits in Mexico are being sought to serve this industry, in line with new rules of origin for the core parts for passenger vehicles and light trucks found in the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA).

What is being promoted as positive and necessary for the country's development is in fact a project strongly tied to private capital – one that poses high risks to the public treasury, while being based on the dispossession, destruction and militarization of the territories where this mineral is located.

What has been dubbed the "nationalization of lithium" in Mexico are miniscule legal reforms that do not guarantee full state ownership of the companies extracting and processing lithium. On the contrary, this process is seeking to legitimize and enable a public-private business model in which the participation of private companies – and even foreign firms – has not been excluded.

The designation of lithium as a *mineral* of public interest and, essentially, *strategic*, empowers the State to use force to advance these projects. The priority projects for the current government, such as the Mayan Train or the Interoceanic Corridor, give us a clear idea of what this may entail: acceleration of approval processes for the required permits; lack of transparency; disinformation and manipulation to fabricate social acceptance; public and political lynching of project opponents; the criminalization and use of state security forces; the possibility of direct land expropriation; and ongoing impunity for the health and environmental harms that these projects cause, leading to the creation of sacrifice zones.



The Mexican government has publicized the nationalization of lithium as a process parallel to that taking place in Bolivia and in other South American countries, emphasizing the idea that it is part of a "leftist" Latin American integration project. However, North American integration is what marks the decisions being made in Mexico. What's more, the reality of what is taking place in South America has not been so encouraging. In Bolivia, despite having more lithium resources than Mexico, the high expectations around lithium mining have not been fulfilled. Rather, the public investment in lithium mining and processing has led to a significant increase in public debt and socio-environmental conflict, marked by controversial associations between foreign companies and the national government.

The socio-environmental impacts that we can anticipate from the projected exploitation of lithium in Mexico are similar to those from open-pit mining. This should give rise to serious concern. In particular, water consumption, loss, and contamination are major risks given that the areas designated by the Mexican Geological Service (SGM) for lithium prospecting are regions affected by droughts and severe water scarcity.

The Bacanora Lithium project alone is projected to become a 1.29 km² open pit mine, which would generate 131 million tons of toxic waste during an estimated 20 years of production. Twenty-five million tons of wet tailings would remain on the land after mine closure. During the first phase of exploitation alone, this mine would require 1.1 million cubic meters of water per year and 1.9 million cubic meters in phase 2.

Most of the lithium resources that the Mexican Geological Service (SGM) has identified are in clay deposits, and to date, no project has reached commercial production in this type of deposit. And so not only does lithium extraction entail all of the socio-environmental harms from other types of mining, it also poses major economic risk to the public treasury for potential losses due to speculation on the use of new technologies.

The energy transition being promoted by the economic elite ignores the underlying issues that must be resolved to address the climate crisis, such as a significant reduction in demand for energy and raw materials. Among other things, this requires strong investment in collective – not individual – transportation, especially in the richest, most consumption-heavy countries in the world.

Regardless of whether the company is public, private or some combination of the two, as people affected by mining, we say NO to the exploration, exploitation, processing and use of lithium and other minerals. True public interest over minerals is the self-determination to leave them in the ground.

