

Jujuy burns: postcards of a rebellion against lithium plundering

Dozens of pickets block the roads in Jujuy, northern Argentina. The protest brings together communities in defence of their territories, the teachers' struggle for wages and the rage of young people against government repression.

Josefina L. Martínez

If Josep Borrell recently said that Europe was a 'garden' and the rest of the world a 'jungle', Ursula Von Der Leyen, in the same spirit of conquest, considers the 'lithium triangle' (northern Chile, Bolivia and Argentina) as a strategic area for the imperial coffers. On her recent tour of Latin America, the EU representative focused on the new 'white gold', as lithium is known. It is an essential mineral for producing electric batteries, such as those used in mobile phones and electric cars. Behind the European 'green transition' lies a brutal plunder, the destruction of the natural commons and the plundering of entire peoples. However, against all resignation, the last word has not been spoken because there is resistance and rebellion in the streets.



Roadblock at the entrance to Susques, Jujuy. The picket prevents access to the lithium mining companies. / La Izquierda Diario

Amid extreme cold in the Puna region and the Quebrada de Humahuaca, the picket lines of the native communities are supported by teachers and health workers. On the roadside, they have set up tents to spend the night and sanitary 'posts'. The videos have gone viral on social networks. Kolla, Quechua, and other women from other communities are moving with courage. The miners arrive chanting: 'Free or dead, never slaves'. Students open the university's doors to those who have travelled to the provincial capital. Teachers have been on strike

This workers' indigenous and popular rebellion has been ongoing for several weeks.

indefinitely for more than three weeks, and primary school teachers are still on strike, chanting, 'Down with reform, up with wages! Young people are joining the movement and occupying dozens of high schools. These are postcards of what is happening these days in Jujuy. You won't find it on the front pages of the international media, but something new is brewing there.

This workers' indigenous and popular rebellion has been ongoing for several weeks. The spark was ignited by the massive rejection of a new anti-democratic provincial constitution, hastily approved by Governor Gerardo Morales and the traditional political caste (the UCR, which leads the local government, and Peronism, which accompanied the vote). The new constitutional text opens the door to the handing over of community lands for the extractive exploitation of lithium while at the same time criminalising social protest. It must be said that the text was also intended to include other anti-democratic measures, such as limiting the right to vote and giving the governor an automatic majority. But they had to eliminate these articles, a product of popular mobilisation. In this, the constituents of the Frente de Izquierda played a leading role, denouncing all the negotiations, between the clock and midnight, of the provincial political caste while demanding that the sessions be televised. They finally resigned before the vote was taken, exposing the tremendous fraud. This helped thousands of demonstrators to redouble their demand to overturn this anti-democratic reform.

The repression on 17 June unleashed the anger. On that day, the police arrested more than 47 demonstrators and scenes of fierce repression were witnessed. On the day the reform was approved, there was more repression and almost a hundred arrests—a foretaste of what is to come in Argentina, subjected to the IMF's adjustment plans.

When the teachers' strike began, a teacher's salary in this northern Argentine province averaged 170 euros. Now,

'Jujuy is on its feet; it has lost its fear. The Indigenous communities are holding roadblocks in defence of their territories and defence water against the plundering of lithium.

the governor has been forced to offer a raise in an attempt to curb the struggle. Jujuy is a land of contrasts and social breakdowns. 'A rich province with poor workers', explains Natalia Morales, a legislator from the PTS in the Frente de Izquierda, who has been on the picket lines for days. She was one of those arrested, along with many women from

the communities, journalists and teachers.

'Jujuy is on its feet; it has lost its fear. The Indigenous communities are holding roadblocks in defence of their territories and defence water against the plundering of lithium by the mining companies. This struggle is an example, as are the women teachers fighting for two weeks in a very important wage struggle. Moreover, something that is unifying all sectors is the rejection of the constitutional reform. Down with the reform, up with salaries and up with rights', is becoming increasingly massive throughout Jujuy's province, she explains.

Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia account for 50-85% of the world's lithium reserves. Communities reject the plundering because extracting the mineral consumes enormous amounts of water. And without water, there is no life. The fires are contagious on the night of the altiplano: 'Who has stolen all the lithium?' they sing to the rhythm of a popular song.

Green capitalism and dispossession

While the highlands of Jujuy are rising against plunder and repression, the offices of European multinationals are celebrating the arrival of "green funds" for the energy transition. So far, 97 per cent of the lithium used by the EU comes from China. Amid major global geopolitical tensions exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, the EU is urgently seeking new sources of lithium and rare earths. Car companies have ambitions to fill the market with electric cars in the coming years (all in the name of decarbonisation and green capitalism). For that, they need lithium as the new white lifeblood of the system. This is capitalist irrationality in all its splendour. Filling traffic-clogged cities with electric cars and, on the way, polluting territories and destroying entire populations when it would be possible to restructure public transport systems, open new sources of jobs without precariousness and avoid environmental pollution. But business is business.

The Marxist geographer David Harvey developed the concept of "accumulation by dispossession", a set of processes that include "the commodification and privatisation of land" with the forced expulsion of peasant populations, the appropriation of common goods and their transformation into private goods, and the "transformation of labour power into commodities and the suppression of alternative forms of production and consumption". All this is facilitated by new "colonial, neo-colonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets, including natural resources". Usury, credit and the IMF's brutal adjustment plans to pay off public debt also act as processes of dispossession in today's capitalism. This plunder always comes hand in hand with ideologies that present the theft of the commons as a "civilisational advance", a policy of "openness to foreign investment" or the much-trumpeted "progress". However, to impose themselves, they require violence, increased anti-democratic mechanisms, anti-rights laws and, when necessary, repression. It must be said, moreover, that this policy is not only the heritage of the traditional right. The current pre-candidate for the Argentine presidency, Sergio Massa, a friend of the US embassy and a serial debt payer said a few days ago that the Andes Mountains are a "cake" for extracting lithium, copper and other minerals.

From this side of the pond, looking at what is happening in Jujuy gives us much food for thought. In a scenario in which the political agenda has become so right-wing, when faced with the vilest right wing, we are only offered to resign ourselves to the 'lesser evil'; another option appears. As Myriam Bregman, pre-candidate for president of Argentina for the PTS in the Frente de Izquierda, said a few days ago: 'Jujuy shows that the right-wing must be confronted, that we must not resign ourselves and we must not submit. Jujuy also demonstrates that fighting can change the balance of power'.

Jujuy is today a laboratory of a new phase of imperialist plunder. French, German and American multinationals compete for their piece of the 'cake'. Mining extractivism and the devastation of territories go hand in hand with starvation wages, the ruin of public education and the precariousness of life. But this small Gallic village in the middle of the Puna also shows the emergence of a new resistance. The struggle of the native peoples, together with the working class, women and youth, is how to stop the adjustment and plunder. An articulation of social protest, which, if developed and generalised through the general strike and spaces of coordination from below, could begin to change everything.

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Nubia Barrera Silva: [Lithium and the Contradictions in the Energy Transition that Devastate the Global South In Favour of the Global North](#)
- Annabelle Dawson – Thea Riofrancos: [Where We Mine: Resource Politics in Latin America](#)
- Ornela De Gasperin Quintero: [The Most Dangerous Climate Catastrophe Delusions](#)
- Mateo Aguado: [The toxicity of the capitalist mode of living](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [The Unbearable Unawareness of our Ecological Existential Crisis](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [Transitioning to Geocratia the People and Planet and Not the Market Paradigm — First Steps](#)
- Gustavo Duch: [Times of Insurrection?](#)



❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

❖ **About the author: Josefina L. Martínez** Born in Buenos Aires, lives in Madrid. She is a historian (UNR). Author of *No somos esclavas* (2021). Co-author of *Patriarcado y capitalismo* (Akal, 2019), author of *Revolucionarias* (Lengua de Trapo, 2018), co-author of *Cien años de historia obrera en Argentina* (Ediciones IPS). She writes for *Izquierda Diario.es*, *CTXT* and other media.



❖ **About this commentary:** "The most terrible consequence of monoculture is how it camouflages itself in a false landscape" was originally published in Spanish by [CTXT](#) in July 2023. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and the original publisher.

❖ **Quote this paper as:** Josefina L. Martínez: "Jujuy burns: postcards of a rebellion against lithium plundering" — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, October 2024.

❖ **Tags:** capitalism, democracy, lithium, indigenous peoples, colonialism, ecology, labour exploitation, extractivism, predation, water, biodiversity, sustainability.

❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

© 2024. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org