Toronto is the political and corporate wing of global extractive violence

Annual mining convention features many of the worst players in the industry, making the city a key site of resistance to extractive capitalism

It is well known within the mining sector that if you want to start a mining company, you do so in Canada, thanks to nearly endless layers of governmental support including exploration subsidies, extensive tax breaks, a free-entry tenure system, and international diplomatic assistance. That’s why the city of Toronto is, in many regards, the engine of the global mining sector.

The Toronto Stock Exchange and Venture Exchange host 50 per cent of the world’s mining companies and raised $6.5 billion dollars of capital for the industry in 2018 alone. Bay Street is aflush with legal teams, financiers, and traders working tirelessly to facilitate the next big mining project. Of Canada’s more than 1,300 publicly listed mining companies, 699 held foreign mining assets worth $168.7 billion. Many of these companies are headquartered in Toronto’s financial
But the failure to put a check on this violence is a non-partisan issue.

The city, as a space of finance, capitalization and networking, is vitally important to the function and expansion of the global mining sector. To help maintain its status as a mining juggernaut and to facilitate further project development, Toronto hosts the annual convention of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada (PDAC).

Each March, the halls of the Metro Toronto Convention Centre are transformed into a hotbed of extractive business activity. In 2019, the 87th meeting of PDAC hosted over 1,000 trade-show exhibitors and more than 500 investor booths, where junior mining companies put their latest mining frontier narratives on display, hoping to catch the eye of willing investors. With over 25,000 attendees, nearly 30 per cent of whom arrived from outside of Canada, the convention itself has become an indicator of the global mining sector’s health.

**Behind the mining industry’s curtain**

But the spectacle that is PDAC conceals the intense destruction wrought by the mining sector. At the
convention, there is little talk of the consequences of the extraction and processing of metals and minerals, which accounts for 26 per cent of global carbon emissions and more than 60 percent of the 100 billion tonnes of materials consumed annually by humans.

For their part, Canadian mining companies are implicated in extreme cases of violence around the world. In Latin America alone, conflicts with Canadian companies resulted in more than 400 injuries and 44 deaths reported between 2000 and 2015. Five UN bodies and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have called on Canada to keep its corporate actors accountable.

The Liberal government’s attempt to address this through the establishment of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise has been met with criticism, and all 14 advisory organizations representing civil society and labour withdrew from the process due to the dilution of the office’s powers by the federal government. But the failure to put a check on this violence is a non-partisan issue — successive Canadian governments have refused to keep mining companies in check.
significant profits from cleaning up its own messes.

These same government officials are prominent figures at the PDAC convention. In 2019, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke to a group of 300 delegates while Amarjeet Sohi, then minister of natural resources, launched the Canadian Minerals and Metals Plan, designed to maintain Canada’s domination of the mining sector, at the convention.

Given this involvement of the highest levels of government and the confluence of actors that meet over the week-long event, PDAC and thus the city of Toronto can be seen as a transnational space that facilitates planetary ecological destruction. In thinking of the mining site as part of a “planetary mine,” sociologist Martín Arboldea shows how resource extraction necessitates a vast network of actors, technologies, infrastructures, and techniques that traverse the entire globe.

A who’s who of the sector’s worst perpetrators

If, like Arboleda, we understand a mine as a network of infrastructures and technologies, not merely as one site where ore or minerals are extracted, then PDAC and other such events are vital spaces where components of the
The Frontier mine coalesced.

In effect, PDAC, as a central node of the mine’s network, repositions Toronto as a critical front line in the planetary struggle against dangerous environmental change, imperialism, and capitalist exploitation. If we are to put an end to abuses stemming from the mining industry and curtail the worst impacts of environmental change, including climate change, we must see Toronto for what it is: the political and corporate wing of global extractive violence.

PDAC’s function is to promote and support status-quo growth across the mining sector. The convention’s 2020 sponsorship list reads like a who’s who of the mining sector’s worst perpetrators.

Vale, a “Patron” sponsor, is just one year removed from the murderous rupture of a tailings dam in Brumadinho, Brazil, which left over 200 dead. Company executives were charged with criminal negligence and Vale warned that another tailings dam disaster was imminent. Barrick, a “Gold Plus” sponsor, is yet again facing a legal challenge, from Tanzanian community members who accuse the mining giant of grave human rights abuses. Holding a “Bronze” sponsorship this year is Sprott.
The CEO of its subsidiary Sprott USA Holdings was recently derided for claiming that the mining sector can reap significant profits from cleaning up its own messes. The list goes on.

When the 2020 convention takes place from March 1 to 4, the machinations of PDAC’s “Diamond” sponsor, at the top of the sponsorship pyramid, are sure to remain atop the headlines.

Sunday evening’s announcement that Teck Resource has withdrawn from the approval process for its massive Frontier tar sands mine will continue to reverberate throughout the extractive industries for weeks and even years to come. Actively engaged in hard rock, oil and gas extraction, Teck’s proposed Frontier mine in the tar sands area of northern Alberta represented a significant carbon bomb. If brought online, it would have produced up to 260,000 barrels of oil each day and an additional 4 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions each year for the next four decades.

A Joint Review Panel found the Frontier mine would “result in significant adverse environmental effects to the asserted rights, use of land and resources, and culture of indigenous groups who use the project area,” but called for the project’s approval anyway.
Grassroots pressure helped stop Teck Frontier

In rallying behind the #RejectTeck campaign, organizers have shown that the continuation of business as usual in the extractive industries is not all inevitable.

The Indigenous-led climate justice organization Indigenous Climate Action articulated the threat the Frontier mine posed to the traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering grounds of nearby Indigenous communities, arguing to reject the project and uphold Indigenous rights as recognized in section 35 of the Canadian Constitution, treaty agreements, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In a letter to Canada’s minister of environment and climate change, Jonathan Wilkinson, Indigenous Climate Action wrote that approval of the mine would mean the continuance of extractive projects “that further dispossess Indigenous communities from lands, waters, and stable ecosystems critical to our cultures.” The Frontier mine constituted Canada’s single largest obstacle to reducing carbon emissions in any meaningful way. Intense public pressure from committed organizers that stretched from Alberta to Spain helped stop it.
As recent actions in solidarity with the Wet’suwet’en Nation demonstrate, blockading critical infrastructure such as railways, ports, and highways is effective, grinding the capitalist economy to a halt. Teck Resources is billed as “Canada’s largest diversified resource company committed to responsible mining and mineral development with business units focused on copper, zinc, steelmaking coal and energy.” In a letter conceding defeat on the Frontier proposal, Teck president and CEO Don Lindsay said the project was withdrawn because both customers and investors are increasingly requiring resource development projects be reconciled with climate change — and Frontier was placed “squarely at the nexus of broader issues that need to be resolved.”

Lindsay also claimed that Teck is not averse to engaging in controversial projects in the future, effectively illustrating the company’s commitment to profit above all else. This, along with the company’s diverse resource portfolio, its massive investment in climate-destroying coal and steelmaking, and its unwillingness to clean up its own toxic mess, ensures the pressure on Teck will not subside with the defeat of Frontier.
In refocusing, Teck will likely use its presence at the PDAC convention to try to repair its public image and regain investor confidence in its broader mining operations. The company will be met with opposition in Toronto, as the Mining Injustice Solidarity Network and a coalition of social justice organizations, Indigenous groups, academics, and artists alike have vowed to convene on Front Street in Toronto to push back against the insidious power of the PDAC spectacle and to counter the actions of the mining sector’s most dominant companies.

These groups will demonstrate how mines — including those much smaller than Frontier would have been — the city, and its extended infrastructures are part of the same settler-colonial and global capitalist network.

As recent actions in solidarity with the Wet’suwet’en Nation demonstrate, blockading critical infrastructure such as railways, ports, and highways is effective, grinding the capitalist economy to a halt. These successful actions in conjunction with the continued violence of the extractive industries and its government allies make certain that spaces such as Toronto’s Front Street will continue to become the newest front lines in the fight against the planetary mine.

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Conference, and PhD candidates who study the extractive industry at York University and the University of Toronto.