

# The Marmato Gold Dispute

## The *guacheros*: strong and united to defend their work Second Report

*Text and photos: Ana María Bedoya*

Fernando Álvarez walks in the darkness of the *El Patacón* mine, barely illuminated by the light of his flashlight. He advances confidently, not needing to feel the walls or confirm the path because he knows this mine like the back of his hand. It was owned by his father from whom, as a child, he learned the miner's trade. He points out the terracotta tones of the rocks while explaining the different minerals. He shows his cutting tool called a *guacha*, this is something that seasoned miners know by intuition, by smell or because the spirit of the gold leads the way.

"Gold has a spirit. It is not a good spirit or a bad one, but frightening. It does not scare me ... when I hear it whistling I listen quietly because it leads me to the gold," concludes Fernando, currently recognized as a leader of the *guacheros* and one of the first who dared break the padlocks on the mines.





To understand the breaking of the locks we need to return to 2007, when Goldfields, a Medoro Resource subsidiary, arrived in Marmato and began to offer the miners money for the mines. Quite a few sold because they believed that the company only wanted the title and would let the miners continue working the mines. Others however, sold and went to the city or nearby towns to invest their money in new businesses. Later a few of them realized that they had sold their mines for ridiculous prices and felt cheated, but there was nothing they could do.

## Selling the Priceless

"I remember that a woman named Celia began to negotiate with the miners on behalf of the company. Worried I asked what would happen to our work if we sold and she said nothing, we should not worry, that everything would remain the same. So I relaxed," commented Fernando. And, believing that promise, many people sold from small mines where 4 to 6 people worked to large mines with 35 workers. All in all Goldfields purchased 84 mines and more than 9 mills which operated in the zone.

The people here had no idea of the value of a mine. They simply heard a price of many millions, got excited and sold," Fernando continues. *El Patacón*, for example, was sold for \$250 million, money which had to be divided among several partners.

After failing in other businesses or spending the money in other places, many of those who sold returned to Marmato to look for work, now not as owners, but as regular workers. Stories now circulate in the village, resounding like legends, such as the one of the miner who, after selling his mine, went around with a dog to whom he gave the best meat from the restaurants, and if he saw another dog he ordered meat for it too, because it was his dog's friend. This lasted until there was no more money and he had to ask for work from those who had been his

employees.

Albert Cardona, owner with other partners of the *Cañaverál* mine, the last one which the multinational bought, tells his story like this: "The mine which was ours is in the high part of the mountain, and was divided in two: one part belonged to don Fabio Mejía and the other to me and my four partners. We sold it for \$350 million, which seemed little to me, but ambition was stronger than the money. With the money I bought a house and a car, but now I don't earn as much as before and I am working as a *guachero*".

What happened next was inexplicable and unacceptable to the Marmatoans: the 84 mines which Medoro Resource bought were closed down and put under guard, leaving 833 people unemployed, every one with a family to support. But that wasn't all: they destroyed the 9 mills which they had also acquired, which was one of the worst offenses to the people and the reason that the people lost confidence in the multinational.



"They broke all of it, destroyed the mills, the *breques*, they scrapped it all and left the Marmatoans without even sheet of zinc. If this company was supposedly interested in giving us work, why did they close the mines and destroy everything? Then we began to worry because we had no place to mill or to work the mines," adds Cardona.





## Breaking the locks

Months passed and the mines stayed closed, a grave situation because they were not accustomed to unemployment in Marmato. When Fernando felt hunger was getting the better of them he said to his partner Fredy that they could not continue like this. "I told him that we should go to *El Patacón* mine and break the locks. We did that, and since then we have been working along with almost 30 people who have joined us," he says.

The news spread like wildfire and soon the action of Fernando and Fredy was repeated in other mines. All over men united, broke the locks and since then have been known as the *guacheros*. But as the multinational and the local government have not condemned their actions, they continue working calmly as if everything were normal. Until the end of 2010 when the unexpected happened: several employees of the *Corporación para Estudios Interdisciplinarios y Asesoría Técnica* (CETEC, Interdisciplinary Studies and Technical Consultancy Corporation), arrived to look for the *guacheros*.

"They came to negotiate in the name of the multinational. They brought us contracts to sign. But we didn't sign because we are not fools," states Fernando. And his partner Fredy adds: "That contract was 13 pages long with many clauses. One of them told us we had to sign a blank page. Imagine... who would dare to sign a document like that?" Above all, if we keep in mind that it took four years of work and investment in these mines, and that the Mining Code specifies that whoever buys a title and abandons it for six months without justification, loses the right to the title.

As of that moment the *guacheros* began uniting and seeking legal advice. Mario Tangarife, *guachero* in the *El Socorro* mine and United Miners Association representative, says: "The contract said we would be allowed to work the mines for 18 months, after which they would transfer the mines to us. But the lawyers told us that would not cover us, because what was offered would mean that we recognized their title to the mines, and that must be decided by law."

But they hadn't started to assimilate and understand the contract and its implications, when the biggest surprise of all came upon them: January 21, 2011 the police came accompanied by representatives of Ingeominas and the Calda

government with an eviction notice for the mines. "They came to throw us out, thinking that only ten people live in Marmato, because they sent only 20 police. We quickly found out and in a short time 200 people rallied just outside the mine. When they saw so many people they realized that it was more complicated than they bargained for. The municipal representative had to come and issue a delay of the eviction because they were going to have a problem."

## United for a common cause

As of that moment the Marmato miners understood that each one could not go ahead alone, that it was necessary to unite if they wanted to demonstrate strength to defend what was theirs. And so they established the United Miners Association making the attempted eviction result in the opposite: it united the miners around a common cause.

"We summoned the mining leaders and sat down to talk. We formed an association and we defined an assembly. At that time we had 380 people representing around 25 mines. Later other associations were formed and we're working on the creation of a single block. For example there are miners of *Echandía*, those of *Cien Pesos* and the Marmato Pro Defense Civic Committee. We may be very ignorant about the law, but we are all together because we will not allow them to take what is ours."

The miners of the area don't tire of repeating what for them is natural and inarguable: that the land of Marmato is carved in the palm of their hands and the legacy which their ancestors left them is more valuable than any paper which tries to take away this right. "Because of our roots and the years which we have been working here, this belongs to us. This town has sustained us and many generations before ours. We belong here," Fredy points out.

are always alert, increasingly mistrustful of the unknown persons who appear on the cobblestone streets of the town (engineers, journalists, entrepreneurs, among others), because now they understand that their mountain, a gold reserve, is the center of attention for foreign interests. "Here we are not accustomed to police presence. We had two policemen at the most who had been around forever. Now there are as many as 15 brought from elsewhere. They want to intimidate us with their presence, they stop and check on miners they encounter in their path and treat us like delinquents. Every two weeks they are replaced so that they do not become attached to us, because all who come here, including the police, end up understanding what they are doing to us and realize we are right," says Fernando watching from *El Patacón* mine, high on the mountain, the police pickups parked in front of the city hall.

## Explosives control, more harassment

The newest form of pressure isn't contracts or eviction orders. For a year now they don't sell explosives, which the miners need to extract material from the mines. "They won't sell it to us, supposedly because we are now illegal although they have always sold us dynamite".

This control has led to a greater problem: homemade dynamite and its surreptitious trafficking. Because of this the police are constantly searching, looking for explosives. The real problem is that if they succeed in catching someone they can accuse him of terrorism.



Although they don't know the plans and the future actions of the multinational, the *guacheros* are waiting, completely on the lookout for anything. And they have decided to seek support, not only among themselves, but also the support of miners from other regions who are suffering the same pressure from the multinationals.

At noon, when the sun's rays strike directly on the mountain, Fredy wipes the sweat from his face with a cloth. It is lunch time and he and his mates seek the shade of the small hut to sit and eat. "It infuriates me that they say that we are illegal and accuse us of trespassing when really we work like mad just to put food on the table every day. This multinational is invading us little by little, like when a person finds out he has cancer and it grows slowly and then forms a metastasis, and suddenly that's it, nothing can be done about it," concludes Fredy.

