

## Latin America/Chile

### Whose gain?

*The community of Mehuín, on the southern coast of Chile, is fighting against the polluting operations of the cellulose company, CELCO, in order to preserve the source of their livelihoods*

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The ten years spent defending Mehuín, on the south coast of Chile, has developed into a kind of saga for the population, whose only demand is that the source of their livelihoods be protected and preserved. Fishermen, women, indigenous people and coastal inhabitants have united to defend their birthright from a daunting foe. And their foe has now come armed with the Chilean Navy, and is confronting fishermen in the bay of Maiquillahue along the coastal fringe. Fishermen have deployed their boats to prevent the destruction of their source of livelihoods: the sea and the water courses.

But what is this story all about? In 1986, a company, Celulosa Arauco y Constitución (CELCO), planned the construction of a cellulose processing plant. Then, as now, they looked at the possibility of discharging the plant's waste into the sea through a 20-km long pipe. The resistance of the people of Mehuín in 1998 stopped that from being realized.

When the company started up in 2004, it opted to dump its waste in the Río Cruces, whose waters feed the Carlos Anwandter Nature Sanctuary, a Ramsar site (Ramsar Site No. 222). That this was a catastrophe was clear after the deaths of the black-necked swans, the usual residents of the reserve, were recorded.

In their search for alternatives, CELCO came up with new proposals and, once again, the sea seemed to be the most convenient solution for waste disposal. For the Valdivian coast to be put to such a use, new environmental impact studies were required. The vessel hired by the CELCO company to do this work had the protection of the Chilean State, and the coastal residents knew that they had no option other

than to prevent these studies from being undertaken — studies that would then allow the construction of the ominous pipe.

The huge ship contracted to carry out the environmental impact studies has entered the bay twice this year, towards the end of July and in mid-August, under escort from Chilean naval vessels. The naval-industrial advance was confronted by numerous artisanal fishing boats and fishermen who sought to prevent the intended operations.

The community of Mehuín do not — and cannot — trust a company that, since the outset of its operations, has deceived them, sending, first of all, divers operating in an undercover manner and then, attempting to do so at night, on New Year. Worse still, they cannot trust a company whose claims of technological excellence were only mere distractions, as past experience has shown, to set up one of the most lucrative businesses in Chile, that of processing cellulose.

Thus the questions of the artisanal fishermen and their organizations seem legitimate: Who does the State serve? Who is the enemy? What is a legitimate State? The community of Mehuín has not only been witness to the unleashing of naval power by the public authorities to protect private interests but is also the victim of persecution and surveillance at home by the police.



The official response in such cases is well known: authority is backed by legality. Even as the authorities hide behind legal norms, such norms permit disasters to happen, like those in the nature reserve. It is, of course a fact that there is no scientific proof to indicate that CELCO is the direct cause of the tragedy of the Río Cruces— just as it is possible that there is no convincing proof that the victims of Hiroshima suffered from the direct action of the atomic bomb. Whatever the men and women in the locality have seen can obviously be twisted around by scientific reasoning and (especially) by the use of statistics. But, is this the role of the State? To turn a blind eye to, and step back from, such a terrible act, whose only objective is personal gain?

Once again, Mehuín is calling for Chile's attention. Once again, the resources belonging to Chilean men and women are being used for the benefit of a few Chileans, to the disadvantage of the great majority of the people of the country, and once again, such benefits are being procured at the cost of the health of current and future generations of coastal inhabitants.

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