On mining companies and colonialism

6 February 1999

The WSWS has replied to the following letter, sent by a former employee at the Freeport copper and gold mine in the Indonesian-ruled territory of West Papua (Irian Jaya). The letter was sent in response to a series of articles and an eye-witness account on the WSWS exposing last July's military massacre on the West Papuan island of Biak.

To the editor,

Having lived in Tembagapura and personally observed the interaction between the management of PT Freeport Indonesia and the Indonesian government and its local army for five-and-a-half years (1989-1994), I can tell you that your reporting is very slanted towards your "Socialist" perspective on how the world operates.

First of all, Freeport hires and trains up to 35 percent of its entire workforce of 18,000 employees from the native peoples of Irian Jaya. These isolated, stone aged headhunters were actively involved in "revenge" type inter-tribal wars, decapitating their enemies and eating their bodies up until the late 1970s when the Indonesian Army put a stop to all their weekend "fun". The last reported acts of cannibalism occurred to a Dutch farmer and his family in 1976 in the next valley over from the Freeport mining operation.

Many of the senior staff that I worked with at Freeport Indonesia were not "accountants" but full-time missionaries, including the son of US Christian missionaries who had been on the island since the 1950's. I saw this man and his group start the first commercial fishing village with modern hospitals, proper training in basic safety in logging, home construction and fish preparation, that would have never been taught to the Irianese if the Americans had not come into their lives to build and expand the mine.

The senior staff at Freeport provided free medical access for all the local tribal peoples in "Lower Wa," a village of 300 natives just below the main townsite at Tembagapura. They built schools and health clinics in all the surrounding villages within helicopter flying distance, as well. Freeport provides agronomists from the University of Texas at Austin to assist in summer internships in these villages to educate these stone-age natives in farming and animal husbandry sciences. Freeport would purchase the excess vegetable crops after the local villagers had supplied their own needs, providing their first real income from their farming efforts. All the while the company provided free medical and educational opportunities to these local tribes.

The Indonesian government would never have provided these basic services because these natives are Christians and not Muslims! If it were not for Freeport's presence in Irian Jaya these past 30 years, I am convinced the corrupt and out of control Indonesian army generals would have totally eradicated the entire West Papuan population of 1.8-million people, decades ago. It is unfortunate that the world's largest and richest copper and gold mine was discovered on Irian Jaya in 1969. Unfortunately, no one can turn back the "hand of time".

There has been horrendous human suffering in the name of the great "Socialist" Revolution in Eastern Europe that has claimed far more human casualties than all the Indonesian atrocities combined. This is no justification to kill innocent women and children who only want their freedom to worship as they please and have a safe home and equal and bright opportunity for their children's futures. Maybe it's time the UN finally stepped into the mess in Indonesia and set up an Atrocities Review Commission and high court to hold the Indonesian officials responsible for their human rights abuses. This should have occurred 20 years ago when the horrors of East Timor were first recorded but it's never too late for justice.

Just because the "Capitalist" got to Irian Jaya before the "Socialists" did, or worse the "Marxists," doesn't mean that Freeport hasn't tried out of its own pocket to help protect and help these people in the process these past 30 years. Could they have done more? Probably, but I can tell you from my own personal experience, the Indonesian government has forced Freeport to limit the amount of aid, education and job opportunities it has been able to provide these poor people. It was either "play by Suharto's rules" or leave Irian Jaya and let the Indonesian government handle the "re-location problems" without any outsiders to record the human atrocities that would had been far worse if Freeport had not chosen to stay and fight the Jakarta corruption.

"Two wrongs will never make a single right" but at least the people I worked with at Freeport in 1989-1994 did try and I believe made a remarkable difference to improve the local natives' quality of life. There is only so much a non-Indonesian company can do when they are constantly being reminded that they are only "visitors" whose visas can be revoked on a minute's notice. Please try to tell both sides of this tragic story in the future, that is if you young "Marxists" have the guts and freedom to do so.

Best regards,

PW

5 February 1999

Dear PW,

Thank you for writing to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Our articles on last July's massacre carried out by the Indonesian regime on the West Papuan (Irian Jayan) island of Biak did not deal in any detail with the role of the Freeport mining operation.

We simply made the point that after centuries of Dutch colonialism and three decades of Indonesian rule, West Papua has some of the worst social, health and education conditions in the world, despite hosting one of the richest copper and gold mines in the world -- the $40 billion Freeport mine, owned jointly by the

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Freeport McMoRan company of the US, Rio Tinto of Britain and the Jakarta regime.

Nevertheless, your letter raises some underlying issues about not only the role of Freeport but also that of colonialism and capitalism historically.

You suggest that Freeport remained in West Papua to fight the atrocities and corruption of the Indonesian regime, rather than to make profits. In reality, the Freeport consortium entered into a lucrative partnership with the Suharto family and its cronies in order to gain privileged access to the mine's wealth. The company enjoys generous tax concessions, pays its local workforce far less than workers in the US or Britain, and is notorious for toxic wastes that devastate the downstream environment.

Even if some of the executives and senior staff involved, including yourself, approached their work with the best intentions of lifting the living conditions of local people, the objective requirements of corporate profit-making on a global scale dictate the payment of the lowest wages possible and the cutting of all costs, including those for the protection of the health and environment of the local people. In other words, the staggering inequality observed in West Papua--a mining project pumping out billions of dollars in revenue while most of the population lives in terrible poverty--is the necessary outcome of global capitalism. The same can be seen across the border in Papua New Guinea and around the world.

Your letter tends towards the centuries-old argument of the "white man's burden"--that colonial plunder was necessary to wrench the primitive peoples of Asia, Africa and South America into the modern world. Capitalism has certainly done so, but how and at what cost?

In *Capital*, Karl Marx drew out the central role that colonialism played in the genesis of industrial capitalism. More or less in chronological order, Spain, Portugal, Holland France and Britain employed the most brutal means, including widespread massacres and slave trading, to exploit the labour and resources of their colonial conquests. This, in turn, provided the momentum for the violent transformation of their own urban and rural populations into wage workers. These interconnected processes were, as Marx established, essential for the original, primitive accumulation of industrial capital.

Drawing on contemporary records and accounts, Marx gave a picture of the methods used by the Dutch authorities in the East Indies, now Indonesia. "The history of the colonial administration of Holland--and Holland was the head capitalistic nation of the 17th century--'is one of the most extraordinary relations of treachery, bribery, massacre and meanness' (Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, London 1817).

"Nothing is more characteristic than their system of stealing men, to get slaves for Java. The men stealers were trained for this purpose. The thief, the interpreter, and the seller, were the chief agents in this trade, native princes the chief sellers. The young people stolen were thrown into the secret dungeons of Celebes, until they were ready for sending to the slave-ships. An official report says: 'This one town of Macassar, e.g., is full of secret prisons, one more horrible than the other, crammed with unfortunates, victims of greed and tyranny fettered in chains, forcibly torn from their families'" [Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Progess Publishers, Moscow, 1986, page 704].

Marx quoted Raffles, once the British Lieutenant-General in the region, but the British surpassed such cruelties in Africa and the negro trade to the Americas. Liverpool, as Marx put it, "waxed fat" on the slave trade. Nor were the aboriginal populations of North America or Australia treated any more humanely by British colonialism. Indians and Aborigines were not enslaved; they were massacred and the survivors driven from the land.

It took these means to establish on a global scale what is routinely presented as an "eternal law of nature"--the transformation of the social means of production and subsistence into capital, and the mass of the population into wage-labourers. Capital, as Marx said, came into the world "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt".

All the while, the barbaric treatment of the native people, often still living in near stone-age conditions, was sanctified by the Christian churches in the name of bringing God and civilisation to the heathen. The missionaries frequently made a unique contribution to these processes by corralling dispossessed native people into settlements where they were ravaged by disease. Today's missionaries may provide rudimentary facilities but they do not challenge the operations of companies such as Freeport. On the contrary, by encouraging the creation of private property rights over land and the introduction of cash crops and other commercial enterprises they facilitate the emergence of an indigenous capitalist layer.

It is true, as you say, that no one can turn back the "hand of time". The people of West Papua can and must be provided with the best that modern science, technology and society have to offer. But this will only be achieved on a truly voluntary, democratic and humane basis by reorganising society as a whole so that human need, not corporate profit, is the guiding principle. That is the basic perspective of socialism.

You equate socialism with the Stalinist regimes that existed in Eastern Europe. These bureaucratically-dominated states were the antithesis of Marxism, based on the suppression of working class democracy, social inequality and a nationalist outlook. Our movement, the Fourth International established by Leon Trotsky, has an unbroken history of struggle against Stalinism. Of course, this question cannot be adequately dealt with in a letter such as this, but if you wish to examine the issue, there is ample material on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Yours sincerely,

Mike Head

for the *World Socialist Web Site*

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