

Quebec band critical of Glencore censored as transnational firm continues to pump out toxic emissions

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A Quebec band has been censored for using its songs to accuse the Horne Smelter of poisoning the residents of Rouyn-Noranda, a town in northern Quebec's northwestern Abitibi-Témiscamingue region.

Local metal band Guhn Twei was recently disinvited from the Alienfest festival scheduled for June in La Sarre, another Abitibi town about an hour's drive from Rouyn-Noranda. A few days later, the festival was completely cancelled by its organizers, one of whom is an employee and shareholder of Métal Marquis, a local company whose main customer is the Horne Smelter.

Owned by the multinational Glencore, the Horne Smelter has long been criticized by Rouyn-Noranda residents for its excessive discharge of toxic materials. These criticisms resounded province-wide in 2022, after new statistics revealed that the company was poisoning the population of Rouyn-Noranda with arsenic and other heavy metals, a fact that the political establishment was fully aware of but systematically covered up.

Guhn Twei singer Simon Turcotte worked at Horne Smelter for a subcontractor until, at age 26, he was diagnosed with sarcoma, a malignant soft-tissue tumor that ultimately led to the amputation of his right leg.

Turcotte told *La Presse* in an interview in January 2023 that he could not prove a direct link between his employment at Horne Smelter and his "extremely rare, super-aggressive cancer that a young man of 26 stumbles upon out of nowhere, when he's in the best of health," but that "we know the health risks associated with the Horne Smelter."

Further evidence of these health risks had come to light in June 2022, when the media revealed that Quebec's then National Director of Public Health, Dr. Horatio Arruda, who was heavily involved in the Quebec government's murderous COVID-19 policy, had blocked the publication of data in 2019 that compared the state of health in Rouyn-Noranda with the rest of the province.

The concealed document identified emissions of arsenic and other heavy metals from the Horne Smelter as being responsible for the serious health problems that afflict the

population of Rouyn-Noranda at much higher rates than in the rest of the province.

Statistics showed an abnormally high number of low-weight births, a life expectancy significantly lower than the Quebec average, 50 percent more cases of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and a lung cancer rate of 140.3 cases per 100,000 inhabitants between 2013 and 2017 (compared to 107.7 for the province as a whole).

Simon Turcotte's music is committed and openly critical of Glencore. Guhn Twei's first album, released in 2023, is entitled *Glencorruption*, and the songs, with evocative names like *Tueurs d'enfants* [Child Killers], *Marée noire* [Oil Spill], *Parasites* and *Eau de fonte* [Smelting Ice], are about the Horne Smelter. In the first song on the album, also entitled *Glencorruption*, Turcotte sings of the multinational's leaders as "white collar bandits," "parasitic capitalists," "child killers" and "planet rapists."

The singer is also very active on social media, where he seeks to inform the population of Rouyn-Noranda of the health dangers of the smelter's emissions. He has pointed in particular to the billions in profits made by the multinational, which refuses to make the necessary modifications to reduce emissions of arsenic and other toxic metals.

After being scheduled to perform at Alienfest 2024 with his band, Turcotte received an e-mail from the organizers on March 26 telling him that Guhn Twei would not be able to perform because of his criticism of Glencore: "We [Métal Marquis] are one of the foundry's suppliers, and that's exactly where it gets sensitive."

After Turcotte publicly revealed the censorship to which he and his band had been subjected, the Alienfest festival was cancelled outright. Organizers cited "conflicts of interest" between sponsors and participants.

Both the organizers and Glencore were quick to point out that the company that owns the Horne Smelter had not intervened to force the withdrawal of Guhn Twei or the cancellation of the festival. As Turcotte rightly pointed out, whether or not there was pressure from the company, the fact that the mere fear of displeasing it is enough to censor an artist and cancel a music

festival is highly revealing.

The episode demonstrates the enormous control that big business and wealthy corporate shareholders exert over every aspect of life—social, economic, political and artistic—under the capitalist system.

In a world where art is devalued, reduced to the level of a mere commodity subject to the imperatives of profit, and where public funding for artists is woefully inadequate, the rich can take on the role of patrons and use their money to repress and censor critical artists.

Censorship targets not only those who denounce harmful business practices, but also anyone who criticizes imperialist foreign policy and war-mongers. Rock musician Roger Waters, for example, has incurred the wrath of the mainstream media and capitalist politicians for his vehement defense of the Palestinian people, his condemnation of the Israeli state's genocidal assault on the population of Gaza, and his opposition to the US-NATO war on Russia.

In 2005, the Horne Smelter stopped funding the Rouyn-Noranda Exhibition Centre after the presentation of the *Mine de rien* exhibition, which criticized the company for its harmful effects on health and the environment.

In a remote region like Abitibi, where economic activity is less diversified, a giant corporation like Glencore—present in 35 countries and with profits of over \$13 billion last year—has an even more disproportionate and undue influence.

But this reality is not limited to Abitibi. Glencore's influence extends across eastern Canada, and is reinforced by the unconditional support the company has received from successive provincial governments of the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois, federalist Quebec Liberal Party and, since 2018, the hard-right "Quebec First" Coalition Avenir Quebec.

To protect Glencore's gargantuan profits, governments have been complicit in poisoning the population by refusing to apply environmental laws to the company, or by modifying them to their advantage.

While the Quebec standard for arsenic emissions has been 3 nanograms per cubic meter (ng/m³) since 2011, the Quebec government allowed the Horne smelter to emit 200 ng/m³ of arsenic until 2021, before reducing this special, massively higher-limit to 100 ng/m³.

In response to the outrage caused by the June 2022 revelations, the Legault government announced that the threshold for daily arsenic emissions would be gradually reduced, reaching 15 ng/m³ in 2027—still 5 times higher than the provincial ceiling.

These thresholds, which amount essentially to a permission to continue poisoning the population of Rouyn-Noranda, were imposed in a new ministerial authorization granted to Glencore for the Horne Smelter in March 2023, which was intended to calm popular discontent.

It was later revealed that Glencore had obtained numerous

relaxations to the ministerial authorization by threatening to close the smelter. The company, which made record profits and paid out \$7.1 billion to its shareholders in 2022, also received a \$150 million tax credit in the Quebec government's March 2023 budget for making the necessary improvements to reduce its emissions.

The average concentration of arsenic in the air emitted by the Horne Smelter was 45.2 ng/m³ in the year following the new ministerial authorization, fifteen times the Quebec standard. Moreover, 33 daily measurements far exceeded this average, including a record peak of 517.4 ng/m³.

Again with the blessing of the Quebec government, Glencore is also polluting the air in Limoilou, a working-class district of Quebec City. For several years, Limoilou residents have complained that the air they breathe is heavily polluted with dust from Glencore's nickel transshipment operations at the Port of Quebec.

A study conducted by the Direction régionale de la santé publique de la Capitale-Nationale from 2017 to 2021 revealed that Limoilou residents breathe in four times more nickel than those in other parts of the city. The Quebec Ministry of the Environment measured 50 exceedances of the daily nickel standard in Limoilou's air between 2018 and 2022. According to experts, the nickel particles present in Limoilou's air are of a type that is carcinogenic.

In April 2022, the Quebec government introduced an airborne nickel monitoring program to "reassure" citizens. At the same time, it acceded to Glencore's demands and raised the authorized daily limit for nickel in the air from 14 ng/m³ to 70 ng/m³ as of April 28, 2022.

Despite this increase in the threshold, the Ministry of the Environment announced last March that it had recorded three significant exceedances of its daily standard for airborne nickel particles between December 2022 and January 2024. The number of exceedances that would have occurred under the old standard was not disclosed. The government also revealed that each of the exceedances was associated with a Glencore operation at the Port of Quebec. Media reports have since confirmed at least three other exceedances.

The Quebec government has issued notices of non-compliance to Glencore, asking it to provide a corrective action plan "within the next few weeks." Environment Minister Benoit Charette refused to fine the company and praised the low number of exceedances of the nickel-in-air standard, without mentioning that this was solely due to his government's raising of the threshold.



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