

Censored for criticizing Glencore, singer of Quebec metal band Guhn Twei speaks out

Our reporters
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Simon Turcotte, lead singer of metal band Guhn Twei, recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the censorship his band suffered earlier this spring.

Simon worked in Rouyn-Noranda, a small industrial town in northwestern Quebec, for a subcontractor of the Horne Foundry, owned by the multinational Glencore. After a multi-year battle with an aggressive form of cancer diagnosed when he was 26, he formed Guhn Twei.

The formation of the group coincided with the revelation, in June 2022, of new information about the deadly consequences of the Horne Foundry's emissions of arsenic and other heavy metals for the health of the population. These revelations fueled popular anger against the multinational which has the full support of the current government of Premier François Legault of the Coalition Avenir Québec and his predecessors in the Parti Québécois and the Liberal Party.

It was at this point that Simon and the other band members decided to turn Guhn Twei into a socially critical band, openly criticizing the Horne Foundry, one of the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region's leading companies, on their debut album, evocatively titled *Glencorruption*.

Guhn Twei's criticism led to their removal from the program of a music festival, Alien Fest 2024, which was organized and sponsored by a Horne Foundry supplier.

Simon and the other members of his band are honest and courageous artists. In their new song "Capitale de l'Arsenic," released last April, the band makes the link between the contamination caused by the Horne Foundry and the wider social situation. Simon sings that Rouyn-Noranda is the "Capital of unbridled capitalism" and the "Capital of social inequality."

The band's second album, *Capitale de l'arsenic*, was announced on June 12 to coincide with the 90th anniversary of the first labor dispute at the Horne mine, known as the Foreigners' Strike, as many of the workers were originally from Central and Eastern Europe.

To explain why he made this choice, Simon told the WSWs that he found their story inspiring because "even though they lost their fight and got deported in the end, they had the courage to fight (literally) for justice and against those who oppressed them."

When asked what he thought of the anti-immigrant chauvinism constantly promoted by Quebec's political class to denounce immigrants and even blame them for the housing crisis, for example, he replied: "In my opinion, it's 'blame-shifting.' Using scapegoats to divert attention from the real causes of the social problems we're experiencing."

On the band's Facebook page, the music video for the song "Capitale de l'arsenic" has been viewed more than 120,000 times and received over 1,000 reactions, most of them positive. This shows that there is clearly an audience among young people and workers for artists who depict social reality honestly.

This interest coincides with the growing struggles of workers and young people—in Quebec, the rest of Canada and everywhere else—in the face of the advanced crisis of the profit system and the many problems it

engenders, including pollution, the degradation of public services, official indifference to the COVID-19 pandemic, war and genocide.

Despite this, too few artists dare to engage with social reality and the world around them. These are the vital questions we discussed with Simon.

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World Socialist Web Site: Can you tell us about the recent cancellation of the festival where Guhn Twei was due to perform?

Simon Turcotte: If we start from the beginning, we were approached at the end of 2023 by one of the people from the Alien Fest organization to play at the 2024 edition. Everything was confirmed until the end of March 2024, when the organization started sending us messages that there might be conflicts of interest. It was a bit nebulous at first and we didn't really understand what was going on. Finally, we received a message from one of the organizers, Francis Pépin, who is also a shareholder in Métal Marquis, the main sponsor of Alien Fest, telling us that he had to withdraw Guhn Twei from the program because of our criticism of the Horne Foundry in our songs. Pépin bluntly wrote in his message that because Métal Marquis is a supplier of the foundry, there was a conflict of interest and that was the reason for the decision.

Then there was controversy, as we decided not to remain silent in the face of this act of censorship. It was covered by the media, and Métal Marquis gave an interview to Radio-Canada. We responded to the article, the journalist came to see us and we gave our side of the story. Then it hit the Canadian media. But before we could respond in the media, the festival decided to "pull the plug" and cancelled the 2024 edition of Alien Fest.

WSWS: What led you to write songs against the Horne Foundry?

ST: To put this into context, I used to work at Horne Foundry. In 2015, at the end of a contract at the foundry, a very large tumor appeared in my thigh. Shortly afterwards, I was diagnosed with sarcoma, an extremely rare and very aggressive soft tissue cancer. Between 2016 and 2020, I had five tumors and five major operations that eventually led to the complete amputation of my right leg.

Moving forward a little in time, in the spring and summer of 2022 there was the arsenic scandal. Data came out on the levels of arsenic in the air in Rouyn-Noranda, provoking a huge controversy and public debate. At the same time, I started my new band, Guhn Twei. We were here in Rouyn-Noranda, in our music room right next to the foundry, in this social context. So with everything I'd been through before, cancer and all that, and everything that was going on socially at the time we were starting this new band, it just came naturally to talk about this subject. From the very first songs, we started talking about air quality and what people are going through here in Rouyn-Noranda in relation to the Horne Foundry and Glencore.

WSWS: Can you elaborate on the impact of the smelter's emissions on the health of the people of Rouyn-Noranda?

ST: It has been proven that there's a higher rate of cancer and lung

disease here in Rouyn-Noranda than elsewhere. There's more heavy metal contamination than elsewhere. As a good example, several cases of sarcoma, the cancer I had and which is supposed to be extremely rare according to the team of oncologists who treated me at Maisonneuve-Rosemont Hospital in Montreal, have come to light in Rouyn-Noranda in recent years. It's supposed to be super rare, but in a small town you get a lot of them.

WSWS: In terms of your artistic development, what were the consequences of your cancer and the situation with the Horne Foundry?

ST: Actually, I think that when you make art, when you make music, you talk about your reality. I've always done that. But after spending so much time being sick, having cancer, going to hospitals and living so close to the foundry; that was my post-cancer, post-amputation reality. It just came naturally to talk about that reality.

But this reality upsets some people. That's why you're labelled a "committed" artist, because you talk about things that others don't dare tackle. But that's my experience: I had cancer, I almost died five times. It was only natural for me to express this in my music.

WSWS: In the film *Minamata*, about the true story of a photographer who documented the health consequences of a chemical plant's discharges on the population of a small town in Japan, it is shown that this commitment "revives" the artist and reinvigorates his art. Do you see a link with your own evolution as an artist?

ST: Yes. When I was younger, the lyrics of my music were much more nihilistic, much more depressive. Now, making committed music that's a call to action, that denounces, that fights, it completely changes my perspective, my state of mind. It has transformed my feeling of having no control over my situation and seeing no light at the end of the tunnel. To go from writing songs that say there's no hope to lyrics that dare to attack the problems we're experiencing in Rouyn-Noranda and point the finger at those responsible, gives meaning to what we're doing and what we're experiencing.

WSWS: After your experiences with illness, what are your impressions of the healthcare system, access to care, whether mental or physical, for young people and the working class, particularly in the smaller regions?

ST: First of all, there's a link to be made with the Horne Foundry. Often, the argument to justify the presence in a city of this kind of a highly polluting plant is that it's good for the economy. But in this economic calculation, they never take into account all the real costs or consequences on quality of life. For example, how much does it cost for people to fall ill from the fumes? So these companies have social costs that are never considered in public discourse. And of course, it's not Glencore that pays these costs, it's the rest of us!

What's more, when you're in Abitibi-Témiscamingue and you catch a cancer like that, you can't get treatment here, they're not equipped for it and they don't have the specialists here in the region. So you have to go to Montreal for treatment, and there are costs associated with that. [Rouyn-Noranda is a seven-hour drive from Montreal.] I was hospitalized in Montreal for weeks at a time over several years, and my family had to take I don't know how many days off to be with me. People here with sick children, how much unpaid leave do they have to take to accompany their children during treatment in Montreal? Plus the cost of transportation, lodging and other medical and other related expenses. It's a reality that's often forgotten when we talk about economic issues.

WSWS: I'd like to take a closer look at these questions. The argument is often made by the media and the government that Glencore's Horne Smelter brings "economic benefits." This argument is also taken up by union leaders. I have here a quote from Dominic Lemieux, Quebec director of the United Steelworkers, the union which bargains for 1,500 Glencore employees, including nearly 400 at the CCR refinery in Montreal East. "We are confident that with the money injected, Glencore will be able to reduce its arsenic and carbon emissions even more

significantly. More than 3,000 direct and indirect jobs depend on it." Would you like to comment on this?

ST: There's a new mining project here in Rouyn-Noranda, Falco's Horne 5 project. For this project, they're not making the job creation argument, because there's already a shortage of manpower. They've already got too many projects because they don't have enough manpower, and we've got a housing crisis—and soon they're going to bulldoze a neighbourhood in Rouyn-Noranda, a hundred-year-old neighbourhood, because of the foundry fumes—so we're going to have a bigger housing crisis, we're going to run out of room to put these people. And yet, they still want to build more mining projects. What's more, there's even a study by an economist that came out last year showing that Rouyn-Noranda's economy would hold up even if the smelter closed. So it's not true!

In the end, we realize that these economic arguments, these arguments about creating new jobs, have always been their pretext, but the real reason is that they want to exploit resources and make money.

WSWS: For decades, successive governments, whether Parti Québécois, Parti libéral du Québec, and now the CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec), have known that the Horne Foundry pollutes and that this has consequences for the environment and people's health. So what do you think the governments' real objective is?

ST: We know that Abitibi-Témiscamingue has always been a mining region. They've always tried to lure big companies here to set up shop and extract our resources. It has always been that way. Governments just want to be able to facilitate the arrival of these industries. Especially a government like the CAQ, for whom the most important thing is the "economy." Abitibi, like all of northern Quebec and northern Ontario, has been developed like a "wild west," with no rules and a system of mining "claims" that means resources don't belong to the population, but to companies. Our subsoil doesn't belong to us, the people of Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Without being an expert in politics, it's something we've noticed living here over the years: the interests of these big mining companies are more important than the interests of the population, of the people here.

WSWS: Do you think artists have a critical role to play in society, and if so, what role?

ST: I think what happened with Guhn Twei in the last few months proves that artists do make a difference, otherwise they wouldn't be trying to censor us. If what music groups, or artists, whatever their discipline, had no impact on society, they wouldn't be trying to silence them, muzzle them, make them disappear. Clearly, artists have an impact, they have an influence.

Whatever the form of expression, whether it's through music, documentaries, films or journalists, the important thing is that people express themselves on subjects that are important. And, above all, that they can do so freely, without fear because of their opinions, or fear that there will be negative consequences for saying what they really think.

WSWS: And why do you think many artists don't talk about social issues in their art?

ST: Precisely because the fear of doing so is justified. Big business is often a sponsor of culture. Here in the region, big mining companies fund all our festivals. If you're a committed artist, you have a rational fear of being excluded from these festivals. We're a small metal band, for example, and it has happened to us. And it's perverted because it makes artists afraid to express themselves honestly on issues they care about, because the companies they might criticize fund culture, events, festivals and artistic projects.

For the companies, it's a great way to avoid criticism, to silence those who might criticize them, by funding events where these artists might perform. They don't even need to make explicit threats. In our case, for example, the Horne Foundry immediately denied that it was behind the

censorship. And it's highly likely that the foundry's directors said nothing to get us removed from the festival. There has just been a culture of silence in the region for so long that they don't need to say anything, people are just afraid to criticize them.

Over the past two years, we've received a number of comments from other cultural players saying, "Aren't you afraid to criticize them? Of not being able to play festivals? Of losing opportunities by doing this?" There's nothing wrong with people saying that, it's just normal for them to ask us those questions. So they [the companies] don't have to do much, the artists censor themselves in the end.

WSWS: That's an important point. It underlines the fact that it's not true that artists have nothing to say about social issues. But, in many cases according to what you tell us, there is self-censorship. Some would have things to say, but they don't go there because they want to continue to evolve in this milieu.

ST: Yes. And it's already so hard [in the arts]. In Guhn Twei, we don't make a living from our art and we don't intend to. But for someone who's trying to make a living from his music, it's already so difficult. Are you going to deliberately get in the way and risk being barred or simply not invited to the various festivals sponsored by big business?

It would be easy to blame artists, to say they don't dare talk about social issues, but we're in a culture where big corporations like Glencore fund the arts.



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