

# Milei opens up Argentina's glaciers to destruction by mining companies

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In the summer of 2025, southern Argentina's Patagonia region was overwhelmed by fires that burned over 270,000 acres of forests, and thousands of homes. The fires were attributed to a decade-long dry spell combined with very high temperatures. Regional rains have fallen by 20 percent. This process was accompanied by less snow in the Andes Mountains, which feed the glaciers, which in turn feed the rivers and lakes upon which Patagonia's cities and towns, and its tourist industry, depend. There was not enough water to fight the fires.

Further north from Patagonia, the vineyards of central Argentina's Mendoza province are drying up from lack of water and being contaminated by gold and copper mining. The poor in many areas go days without potable water, which is diverted to rich neighborhoods.

Indifferent to those links between the Patagonian fires, water shortages and water contamination due to the shrinking glaciers on the Andes Mountains, the fascistic administration of President Javier Milei rammed through a bill modifying legal protections to glaciers to increase mining activity in the Andes.

A key provision in the new legislation leaves it up to the provinces and their corrupt politicians how to manage the glaciers within their borders, effectively pitting one province against another. These provinces will be allowed to decide on a case-by-case basis if they believe glaciers should remain protected or whether to permit open-pit mining projects that could destroy them.

The purpose of the new law is effectively to hand over control of these water resources to mining and oil companies. This is justified by the corrupt and fascistic Milei administration as a road to economic development and greater employment to compensate for the attack on full-time jobs and the deindustrialization of the national economy.

In effect, the right of workers, farmers and the middle class to water is to be sacrificed to further the profit

interests of mining and oil monopolies and the financial oligarchy.

On April 8, a special session of the Argentine Chamber of Deputies voted for Milei's bill to change the Glacier Law that has protected the Andean glacial and periglacial zones.

The changes had been previously approved by the Senate and by the various commissions that deal with natural resources, conservation of the environment and constitutional affairs.

The Glacier Law that this new legislation modifies was approved in 2010. It mandated a count of the glaciers in the Andes and set up strict controls on glaciers and periglacial areas (rock-glaciers and permafrost in the periphery of glaciers) that feed lakes and rivers and exist as reservoirs for fire emergencies, agriculture, human consumption and national parks.

In the context of Milei's onslaught to free the hands of corporations to exploit workers and resources without restrictions having been celebrated as a "model" by Trump, Chile's new President José Antonio Kast, and numerous oligarchs worldwide, the international implications of this legislation cannot be exaggerated.

Massive forest fires also took place in Chile's Patagonian region, in the province of Bio-Bio, where some 160,000 acres burned.

Most of the major river basins in North and South America connect to glaciers and periglacial zones in the Andes, Rocky Mountains, and other regions where glaciers exist. Many of these are shrinking as a result of global warming driven by capitalism.

In South America, the world's largest river basin, the Amazon River Basin, with its source in the Andes' glaciers, occupies one third of South America, approximately six million square kilometers. Its waters encompass Brazil, Bolivia and Peru on the eastern side of the Andes.

South of the Amazon River Basin, the La Plata River Basin, occupies 3.1 million square kilometers in several nations, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay and Argentina. An important element of these and other basins are many lakes filled by the glacial waters providing water and hydroelectric energy to farms and towns and cities.

The entire political establishment is implicated in this attack on these vital bodies of ice and snow, and its consequences. The original Glacier Law that had implemented protections had been originally vetoed in 2008 by Peronist president Cristina Kirchner, who argued against placing “environmental concerns ahead of activities [such as mining and oil drilling] potentially worth 3 billion US dollars, that could be carried out with perfect care for the environment,” (a phrase coined by and used repeatedly around the world by mining executives).

The veto triggered waves of popular protests, in defense of glaciers, and against President Kirchner’s growing relationship with Canadian-based Barrick Gold and other multinational mining firms. In Argentina, Kirchner’s 2008 veto was dubbed “the Barrick Veto.”

In September 2010, the Glacier Law was finally approved with Kirchner’s assurance that there would be no veto.

Five years later, a major mining disaster took place, at the *Veladero* open pit gold mine in the Andean province of San Juan. The mine is a joint partnership between Barrick and Shandong Gold, a corporation owned by the Chinese government.

The mine had opened in 2005 in the periglacial region, between 2.5 and 3 miles up the Andes, near several glaciers that feed streams that in turn feed the rivers of the Desaguadero Basin whose waters eventually flow into the Atlantic through southern Buenos Aires province. It continued operating, disregarding the 2010 law.

On Sunday, September 13, 2015, 140 miles downriver from the mine in the town of Jáchal, in northern San Juan Province, the family of a Veladero worker received a WhatsApp message about an accident at the mine. Following ten days of silence, Barrick/Shandong, confirmed on September 23 that some 300,000 gallons of cyanide had contaminated a nearby river and its tributaries in the basin.

This event resulted in a social explosion and revealed the collaboration of provincial governments which had turned a blind eye to the way the mines were being run by the corporate oligarchy, in violation of the 2010 law.

The cyanide spill was the largest ever in Argentina,

contaminating water in San Juan, and other provinces. Since 2015, there have been four more toxic spills from the mine. In 2017, 70,000 people signed a petition demanding the mine’s closure. In addition to cyanide, there have also been arsenic spills and mercury contaminations.

Similar violations have become common in Chile, Peru and other Andean nations. Barrick has become infamous for its violations of environmental regulations but continues to operate copper and gold mines in Peru, Chile, Mexico, Australia and in several African nations.

Outside of Milei’s governing coalition (La Libertad Avanza), the pseudo-left and some smaller parties (that voted against it), the voting for the April 8 legislation was mostly geographically divided. Legislators from eight mining provinces approved the law, regardless of party, while those from other provinces voted against. This was the case, also with those parties, and coalitions that brand themselves as Peronist. Support was also divided in the labor bureaucracy. The mining union (AOMA), the metal workers union (UOM) and truckers (STOTAC) supported the new law, while other unions passively rejected it without mobilizing workers against it.

The lessons from Milei’s glacier legislation demonstrate that the defense of the environment, including the protection of glaciers and periglacial zones, cannot be left to the political parties of the ruling class, including the fascistic Milei administration, the bourgeois nationalist parties like Peronism, the pseudo-left organizations or trade union bureaucracies. It requires the scientific education and the international mobilization of the working class, united across every continent, in the revolutionary struggle for the socialist transformation of the entire planet.



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