

Xinka indigenous people's inside–outside

This indigenous community from southeastern Guatemala oppose the Escobal silver mine, the world's second largest silver deposit. The mining of silver has polluted water and soil and displaced whole communities in the region. Xinka organisations have allied with rural farmers, other indigenous organisations, and human rights groups to defend their rights, land, and water. It has been a bloody struggle with the killing and detention of activists.

With the signature of the Peace Accords in 1996, the Xinka were finally recognised as one of the four Peoples in Guatemala. (The others are Mayan, Garifuna, and Meztizo.) Their political-cultural strategy involved years of community education and rituals to reclaim their own history and identity, while the legal dimensions of their struggle involved lawyers and human rights experts. Recognition as indigenous people entitled them to the rights under ILO Resolution 169 to free, prior, and informed consent on their land, an essential tool in their struggle against the massive mine.

The Xinka trace their history back hundreds of years in Guatemala. In recent decades, they have built their organising power with allies and advocated for formal legal recognition as indigenous people. At the forefront of the struggle is the Xinka Parliament, representing more than 200,000 indigenous people across 13 communities in southern Guatemala. Women leaders play a major role. As they put their lives on the line in the blockades, Xinka women also organise within their communities and movements to challenge traditional gender roles and gender-based violence.

The Xinka first achieved a ruling from the Guatemalan Constitutional Court that suspended mining operations until the government could undertake a consultation process consistent with ILO Convention 169. Initially, the Xinka Parliament was excluded from the consultation process, but the Xinka combined a women-led direct action with a legal strategy to temporarily block the mine, while resetting the conditions to ensure a robust consultation and consent process.

In late 2020, they succeeded in securing a commitment from the government to recognise their 59 delegates. The Xinka-led consultation process – in the context of attacks by mining security and police – relied on the collaboration of outside experts but was designed to strengthen their leadership and organisation in addition to generating evidence to make their case. The evidence showed toxicity in the water and soil that is affecting health and undermining the fruit production that Xinka depend on.¹

¹ Jeff Abbott, Women lead the struggle against mining and machismo in Guatemala, Open Democracy (2015).