

Libertad para Alberto! Mapuche Land Defence in Chile & the Goldman Environmental Prize

An interview with Belén Curamil and Miguel Melin

IN APRIL 2019, Alberto Curamil was awarded the **Goldman Environmental Prize**. Leader of the Alianza Territorial Mapuche, Alberto won the Prize for organizing communities to stop the construction of two dams on the Cautin River that would have altered the landscape, exacerbated drought in the region, and continued the Chilean assault on Mapuche culture and self-determination.

Alberto could not accept because he is currently in a Chilean prison for charges widely considered fabricated. Accepting instead was Belén Curamil, Alberto's daughter.

At the award ceremony, she described the Mapuche struggle as one "for life and its continuity. We are the people of the earth. Our central responsibility is to protect everything that makes life possible."

On her way home from accepting the prize, Belén, joined by Miguel Melin (spokesperson for the Alianza Territorial Mapuche) visited Toronto. With support and translation from Dr. Magdalena Ugarte at Ryerson's School of Urban and Regional Planning, Yellowhead was able to discuss Alberto's incarceration and Mapuche resistance with Belén and Miguel.

Welcome to Toronto! Can you tell me a little bit about your journey and about this river?

BELÉN: I came on behalf of my father to represent him at the Goldman Environmental Prize ceremony. My father has been in jail for the past nine months for being a very active leader in the struggle of the Mapuche nation. This is a struggle for the territory, for the rivers, for the lands, for the animals. Particularly against the forestry industry and hydro-electric plants. That is why he is in jail now and the reason I am here with the support of my brother, Miguel.

MIGUEL: That river begins in the Andes mountain range and it flows to the Pacific Ocean. And in this case we are talking about an area in the foothills of the Andes mountains where there is quite a lot of Native vegetation including medicine and other plants that several communities (both traditional and created by state legislation) use for ceremonies, for livestock, the animals generally. This is Mapuche territory. But 130 years ago the Chilean State began to occupy it.

What kind of relationship is there between the Mapuche and the Chilean state in those 130 years?

MIGUEL: The occupation was a military occupation. There was the Argentinian and the Chilean, because the Mapuche are on both sides of the border. In the late 19th century, both countries attempted to colonize the Mapuche, though used quite the euphemisms.

On the Chilean side occupation was called the “Pacification of the Araucanía.” And on the Argentinian side, it was called the “Campaign of the Desert.” These were military campaigns that brought genocide and termination and then the survivors of that process were basically allocated pieces of land similar to the reservation system in Canada. These “mercy titles” were basically documents of dispossession that were given to the Mapuche by the government until 1929-1930.

Then what happened in 1929-1930?

MIGUEL: Well, the communities got totally constrained to the very small pieces of land, an area that totals around 5% of the original Mapuche territory. The rest of the territory that was taken by the state was given away to European settlers, mostly German, Italian and Swiss. And there are others as well. Meanwhile, Mapuche have been trying to keep the resistance, particularly cultural resistance, alive. Mapuche went from being for thousands years of a successful society that was mostly based on agriculture to becoming a poor people limited to small scale subsistence farming on very little land. Then starting in the 1990s, in the Chilean case, the end of the Pinochet dictatorship, but also liberation movements in other parts of Latin America, there has been a mobilization against the 500 years of colonization and towards land reparation.

What has changed since then? Is there any legal rights or protection for the Mapuche?

MIGUEL: On the Argentina side of Mapuche territory there is constitutional recognition for Indigenous Peoples, but that does not exist in Chile. Even still, the progress is pretty similar and limited. In 2007, Chile voted in favor of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In 2008, the country endorsed Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) after 20 years of parliamentary discussions. So since 2009 there has been some movement in terms of talking about consultation, Indigenous consultation. Of course, but consultation is not binding. We know that the principle of free, prior and informed consent should be like a guiding principle behind consultation. But in practice we know that it's not the case.

One thing that was useful in Convention 169 was the idea of ancestral lands.

Mapuche were able to prove their presence on the land even though the state was saying “oh no, there was no Mapuche occupation in these lands and hasn't been for a long time, there are no cemeteries here, there has been no prior use or occupation.” Resorting to this concept of ancestral lands, which goes beyond state recognition, was persuasive.

What other strategies were used to stop the dam, and I'm thinking specifically of the work that Alberto did?

MIGUEL: Alberto started bringing together all the surrounding communities and including non-Indigenous people in the communities and actually there was a very large march in the town of Curacautin that was by far the largest there has ever been which was really important in terms of bringing people together. Alberto started talking to people, letting people know, both Mapuche and non-Mapuche that we can't let this thing happen here.

So, the courts and organizing the public helped. Did the media pay attention or push the familiar racism?

MIGUEL: Media generally, mainstream media doesn't really pick up these issues very much. It was more, mostly a combination of grassroots mobilization with court and legal action.

BELÉN: There is so much racism in Chile, you can see it everywhere. It is really visible and becoming more visible now because Chile is experiencing significant immigration from other Latin American countries. So there is racism against Black people and actually everyone who is not the “average” Chilean citizen. The average Chilean citizen is really racist.

MIGUEL: Media generally portrays Mapuche struggles in terms of extremism, inciting violence and terrorism. So it was in spite of this that Mapuche were able to stop the dam. But it was at this point, and I suppose here is where the media actually helped the state, that Alberto went to prison.

What happened?

MIGUEL: He was detained and imprisoned nine months ago, just after four dams projects were stopped. After stopping the dams, Alberto was still working mobilizing people against two other projects. One is the forestry industry which is really expansive in Chile, and another project to create a dam or sort of, basically to collect water for private land-owners in the area. That's what he was working on when he was detained.

BELÉN: But when Alberto was detained, it was not as a result of this mobilization and opposition to the dam. Instead, he's been accused robbing a credit union; something that happened in a town really far away from we live and totally unrelated. So far there has been no trial. He's in pre-trial detention and they keep postponing. But there's no evidence. We know, the communities know that these are fake accusations.

Are there any prospects of Alberto getting out of jail soon?

BELÉN: Yes, he's going to be freed for sure*.

**Alberto's trial was set to begin in May but has, again, been delayed by Chilean authorities.*

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To learn more or support Alberto Curamil and the Alianza Territorial Mapuche, visit <https://www.alianzateritorialmapuche.com> and follow @PuLofMapuXawvn on Twitter.

