

RÍO TURBIO

Just transitions to survive coal

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The interviews that gave shape to this report were conducted by Mauro Fernández with the production support of Ernesto Zippo between April 5th and 11th, 2021 in Río Gallegos and Río Turbio, in the province of Santa Cruz.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The unprecedented and irreversible climate crisis humanity is going through demands a drastic change of paradigm in its model of production, distribution and consumption. The extraction and burning of fossil fuels, especially coal, are the main cause of the increase in greenhouse gas emissions, which produce global warming. The replacement of these fuels with clean and renewable energy sources is imminent, while the impact of this technological change on those working in the fossil fuel industry is uncertain.

In this report, the Fundación Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (FARN) aims to make an environmentalist approach to understand the imaginary of the workers of Yacimientos Carboníferos Río Turbio (YCRT) - the mine located in the town of the same name, in the Argentine province of Santa Cruz - on the concept and experiences of just transition. This is an idea that was born with the American oil workers in the 1970s and has been consolidated over the decades, to become today a global social demand in the face of the urgent ecological transitions that the climate crisis calls for.

Against this background, this paper explores the history, the present and the alternatives to fossil development imagined -or not- by the residents of the mining village of Río Turbio. Above all, it investigates and seeks to transmit experiences from the heart of Argentine coal by means of interviews with the inhabitants. Although the burning of this mineral is marginal in the country -it generates less than 1 percent of the national electricity-, the case of Río Turbio is emblematic due to its productive hegemony and the strong social bond of the community with the coal activity.

This report does not seek definitive answers. It explores histories and raises new questions. It therefore offers a brief contextualization of the context that drives these transitions, while at the same time providing a brief description of the concept of “just transition”, which has already been explored in other studies -some of which are detailed in the bibliography-.

In the exercise of systematizing some common elements about the transitions that the people of Río Turbio are going through, the following stand out:

- 1.** The strong territorial roots of the figure of the miner. This identity cannot be disputed, but rather resignified through the recognition of its history.
- 2.** The lower resilience of populations with productive hegemonies. “Coal or death” is a repeated slogan that, in addition to planting battle, resists with desperation. For this reason, productive diversification will be key.
- 3.** Feminisms are beginning to shake historically male and patriarchal structures, such as the fossil industry. At the same time, they provide a platform to resignify the concept of “transitioning”, moving away from the idea of threat and towards a path of deconstruction and learning.
- 4.** Small-scale alternative production, such as craft beer, is finding its way. It does not dispute hegemony, but builds new options outside the established ones.
- 5.** Workers are aware that they are not mainly responsible for the climate crisis. They demand action from the Global North and therefore postpone their transition as long as possible. Without a State that accompanies these transitions in a comprehensive and far-sighted manner, resistance will be inevitable.

On the other hand, while this report does not explore programmatic solutions, it does identify possible and necessary ways to address human-scale models of transitions. At least one main one: there is not an ideal just transition model, there are multiple. The inhabitants of the basin may not be familiar with this concept, but they are aware of their urgent needs: the lack of housing, the inflation that beats salaries, the silent emptying of the company (YCRT) and the young people who still cannot get a job.

Adding a new layer of complexity to the existing social urgencies, through the search for productive transitions, inevitably implies a reaction of resistance. Only a State policy that offers alternatives to guarantee social rights in the adverse context faced by its inhabitants will be able to demonstrate that they will not be left to their own devices. Likewise, only State action will affirm that transitions are not only about energy and that they must be carried out taking into account their social, economic and cultural aspects. To this end, the voice of the peoples and workers of this industry must be permanent in the transition towards the inevitable decline of fossil fuels in Argentina and the world.

1. INTRODUCTION

After decades of scientific warnings, diplomatic negotiations, popular demonstrations and territorial resistance, the energy transition is starting to become a reality.

The Paris Agreement, signed in 2015, set the 2.0 °C temperature increase -relative to the pre-industrial era- as an insurmountable ceiling, and called to do everything possible to stop the increase at 1.5 °C. The severity of the consequences in either scenario is extremely intensified. The scientific recommendations for not exceeding 1.5°C are clear: global greenhouse gas emissions must be halved this decade and reach zero by 2050. The scale of the transition is massive, and the timing is urgent.

In this context, which is also marked by a global economic and health crisis, various governments have begun to take measures to reduce their energy emissions - 71% of the global total is accounted for by this sector - including, first and foremost, the burning of coal. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the use of coal must be reduced by 78% in this decade alone, and by 2050 it must be completely eliminated.

This evidence, together with the growing demonstrations and social demands in this regard, began to paralyze the construction of new coal plants. At the same time, obsolete coal-fired power plants (plants that produce electricity using coal as fuel) are closing down in anticipation, and mining operations are also beginning to cease. In Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom, countries that have been emblematic of coal mining since the Industrial Revolution, closures are being ordered to reflect these transitions.

Without adequate planning, inclusion and sensitivity, these measures will end up placing the economic and social cost of this reconversion on the backs of the workers of the industry that boosted the development of Western elites. It is not by chance that these same countries, together with other countries of the Global North that enjoy high gross domestic product (GDP), are historically responsible for more than 90 percent of the climate crisis we are going through as humanity (Hickel, 2020).

Where will the cost of these as urgent as essential transitions fall, as a result of the unsustainable and polluting development of the powers of the last centuries, is the question that led the trade union movements, in the first instance, to promote the concept of “just transition”. This is an idea that seeks to prevent workers from paying with their jobs and, in turn, with their family economies, thus bearing the consequences of a model designed and sustained for the benefit of the elites and to the detriment of the common good.

The concept of just transition is here to stay, formalized in the framework of the United Nations in the preamble of the Paris Agreement and from the guidelines published by the International Labor Organization (ILO) -both documents approved in 2015-. However, its meaning continues to be a territory of dispute.

This dispute of meaning ranges from the definitions conceived by consolidated groups that are part of international negotiations to the empty meanings of some governments, as well as the experiences and situations of the inhabitants of the territories who are experiencing first-hand the complexities involved. In particular, the countries of the Global South, which bear greater historical responsibility, greater ecological and social consequences, and the same urgency to transform their productive matrices.

Thus, from the remote south of the south, in the Argentine town of Río Turbio, one of the southernmost in the world, where the state-owned company Yacimientos Carboníferos Río Turbio is located, the enormous complexities involved in building a post-fossil era for the mining villages of an upper middle-income country, dependent on commodity exports, and which still has profound debts in terms of guaranteeing basic social rights, are evident. It is a case study of the towns that have forged not only their economy, but also their identity, from the mining pit. Towns that today find themselves at the crossroads of a profound re-signification or an increasingly solitary resistance.

The role of coal in Argentina is marginal: it represents less than 1 percent of electricity¹ generation. And it does so from the San Nicolás Thermal Power Plant, which burns coal imported from South Africa, since the coal from Río Turbio is too expensive and of poorer quality. The challenge of putting an end to coal in Argentina is not technical - its power generation capacity is easily replaceable if renewables are used - but social.

The sixteen thousand inhabitants of Río Turbio have fought, since the Coal Congress of 2001 until now, for a thermoelectric power plant at the mine mouth to make their work profitable, increase the labor supply and achieve a logical extension of their productive activity. However, it seems somewhat contradictory to connect the Río Turbio Thermoelectric Power Plant (CTRT), a new 240 MWe (megawatt electric) plant to the electricity grid in the midst of a climate crisis in a country with 85% of its energy matrix of fossil origin² and which has committed itself both to be carbon neutral by 2050 and to reduce its emissions by 7% in this decade compared to those of 2010.

Río Turbio is the most fitting example of the towns that were built on the basis of a productive hegemony. From the epic of the discovery of the mineral, the foundation of the mining village in the forties, the international solidarity with the Chilean workers at the height of the Pinochet dictatorship, the resistance to the privatizations of the neoliberal era, the tragedy of corruption and abandonment, to the promise of a collective dream. In this land, the most inopportune thermoelectric power plant is born and confirms that everything revolves around the black mineral.

With this history on its back, Río Turbio today demands to leave behind the repetition of the “just transition” slogan and its theoretical meanings, to explore the conception of this feasible justice for the daughters and sons of a consolidated identity.

Far from finding answers, this report explores horizons and transitions in the present tense. Possible futures, alternative and parallel paths that are also part of the transformation - not only energetic - that the planet demands.

For this purpose, between April 5 and 11, 2021, thirteen interviews were conducted in Río Gallegos and Río Turbio, in the province of Santa Cruz, with the aim of getting to know the views of the actors on the past, present and future challenges of a town dedicated to mining activity. The interviews were conducted by Mauro Fernández, author of this report, with the production support of Ernesto Zippo.

1. Tunbridge, P (2020). <https://ember-climate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Global-Electricity-Review-2021-Argentina-Translated.pdf>

2. BP Statistical Review of World Energy (2021). <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2021-full-report.pdf>

2. ¿WHICH TRANSITIONS?

Before delving into the local people's histories, it is necessary to understand what we intend to talk about. The concept of just transition was conceived in the U.S. trade unions in the 1970s, closely linked to energy transitions due to environmental issues and in regard to the aim that the cost of production shutdowns should not be shouldered by the workers.

These agendas began to intersect with environmental, social and productive ones, gaining greater relevance (always in the United States) with the advent of the 1990s. It was not until the new millennium that the concept landed, thanks to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC, which has brought together the world's main trade union centers since its birth in 2006), in inter-national forums such as the United Nations climate summits and ILO meetings.

This perspective on transitions came to the global level leveraged by the working class sectors of the Western North³. It was logical: industrialization had taken hold there, where most responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions lay. It was there where the necessary efforts to mitigate these emissions should be made first and most drastically.

While it is reasonable for the workers of the industrial North to have been the driving force behind these battles that are now being waged in the South, their realities were far apart from those of the productive sectors of the peripheral countries. While the workers of the Global North got ahead of their political leaders, Latin America received and began to problematize the concept only with the onset of the new millennium, thanks to the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA), the regional arm of the ITUC⁴.

Argentina incorporated the just transition narrative with the government headed by Alberto Fernández, who took office on December 10, 2019. Although it did not drive notable initiatives in this regard, it incorporated the slogan into the presidential discursive line. However, despite some commendable sectorial efforts, neither the unions, nor the Ministry of Labor, nor the majority forces within the government coalition are working from the precept that the fossil hegemony, and with it its working men and women, is coming to an abrupt end. In fact, the opposite is true.

Failure to carry out the diagnosis in time to achieve a just transition can be counterproductive, especially for those who are on the front line: the workers. To avoid the impact on the most vulnerable; to build productive, educational and cultural alternatives and to understand each region as unique are just some of the challenges that the country faces if it wants to meet its climate objectives while guaranteeing social rights. For this reason, it is necessary to overcome the enunciation and promote the participation of the sectors involved, both from the bottom up and from the top down.

3. Núñez, J. (2020). Transición Justa, debates latinoamericanos para el futuro energético. Observatorio Petrolero Sur (OPSur). <https://opsur.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Transicion-Justa-Jonatan-Nunez-1.pdf>

4. Ibid.

3. HISTORIES IN TRANSITION

For the making of this document, thirteen interviews were conducted between April 5 and 11, 2021. Despite the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and following all the recommendations of the national, provincial and municipal health authorities, twelve could be face-to-face and only one was over the telephone.

This chapter summarizes some of these accounts in chronicle format, counted from the author's voice. It aims to bring the protagonists' views on the past, present and future challenges of a people forged in the heat of coal, in the face of the energy revolution needed to address the climate crisis with a social justice perspective.

3.1. THE OTHER RIVER

First and foremost, the pandemic. The restrictions to curb the circulation of COVID-19 in the province of Santa Cruz make my arrival in Río Turbio uncertain. Thus, by accident, my first destination is the city of Río Gallegos, the provincial capital located on the eastern end of the Argentinean sea.

The company, as several of its two thousand workers call Yacimientos Carboníferos Río Turbio, has a division in the city in charge of the management of Punta Loyola, the port from which it seeks to export the mineral. Today it is not exporting anything. Nor does it send coal to the San Nicolás Thermoelectric Power Plant, which, according to sources from Luz y Fuerza union, imports cheaper and better quality coal from South Africa. Punta Loyola is limited to receiving, from time to time, tons of limestone that accumulate in the open air at the port, with the future objective of reducing the emissions that will be expelled from its chimney if the Río Turbio Thermoelectric Power Plant is finally put into operation.

The transport of material between Turbio and Gallegos (which today is limited to the occasional reception of limestone) is done through 285 kilometers of the southernmost industrial railroad in the world, which opened in 1951 and is also owned by the company. It is an alternative to freight trucks in a region hostile to road traffic, forged at a time when the train was still a possible dream. The YCRT railway workers are grouped in *La Fraternidad*, one of the four unions with the largest presence. Today they number no more than sixty.

My forced time in Rio Gallegos offers unexpected encounters. Most of them with workers displaced to Punta Loyola; almost all of them, "nyc", that is, born and raised in Rio Turbio. I also meet Ernesto, a postal employee, a lifelong Rio Turbio inhabitant who has never worked for the company. He is my first example of the unreserved and unconditional openness that would await me on the trip.

In a modern café on the corner of Kirchner and San Martín street, he opens his notebook and tells me about his family life in the old Mina 3 camp, in the field, but he does not put the emphasis on that. The history he wants to share is that of the workers who resisted the permanent abandonment and emptying by different national administrations, such as the privatization experiment entrusted to the liquidator -appellation also chosen by other workers- Sergio Taselli, by the Menemism during the provincial government of Néstor Kirchner. He also recalls the sackings of the Macrista era, which continued at the beginning of the Frente de Todos administration, already with Aníbal Fernández as the controller and the political chess game that the region became, especially after the serious tragedy of the 14 miners⁵. Tragedy that is an open wound in the history of the coal basin and the collective feeling of Santa Cruz.

A wound that the then President Kirchner tried to heal with millions of dollars for the construction of the Río Turbio Thermolectric Power Plant, a historical claim of the workers, today baptized “*Central Térmica 14 mineros*” (Thermal Power Plant 14 Miners).

Ernesto suggests names to me, makes calls. Everything to open up the possibility that the history of his people and their fighters will continue to be told. He also invites me to listen to Guajardo and Lito Paredes. I download their records to accompany me during the 300 kilometers I will have to drive if the Emergency Operation Center of Río Turbio grants me access.

Thus, amid calls and WhatsApp messages, I contact members of the State Workers Association (ATE), the *Luz y Fuerza* union, and referents of centers for retirees, pensioners and retired workers of YCRT. I am trying to understand the complex and never-ending union and political ties that intertwine in a province in which even the work in a greengrocer’s shop -as my friend Iván, who has been living in the capital of Santa Cruz for the last five years, tells me, is obtained through the payroll of the trade union.

In this province, the right to housing is conceived from a different perspective from that of the large cities in the center of the country, and membership in a union structure promises (and at times succeeds in doing so), to guarantee land, housing and work. At least this promise exists, along with the difficulty of prevailing in autonomy on the outside of these structures that are as self-contained as they are top-down. Communion and plurality are perceived as renewed. So does the militant demand, and becomes almost a meritocratic duty.

WANCITO

“Santa Cruz: Land of Glaciers”, says the sign that Ariel Wanzo has stuck on the wooden door of his room. Half an hour before, he had picked me up at my friend Iván’s house, two blocks away from the Boxing Club, in Río Gallegos. Although I had mobility, Ariel told me it was better that way, because he lived in a neighborhood with unnamed and unnumbered streets. A “new” neighborhood, under permanent construction, on the outskirts of the city.

The house was awarded to his father, Raúl, the historical “Wanzo” of whom Ariel is proud. Raul was a reference of ATE in the years of resistance to neoliberalism and one of the pioneers of the idea of the mega-plant. Ariel will speak proudly of his father; so will his coworkers. Since his father retired and left the province, Ariel lives in the house with a dog that reaches my waist and jumps without any awareness of its size. He offers me coffee as he leads the tame beast into the garden.

Before telling me about the desires of the workers at Punta Loyola -where he is a delegate of the Internal Board-, “Wancito” explains in detail what it was like to be a gallery miner. He talks with nostalgia about the work he had in his time at Turbio. He highlights the technological advances that saved more lives than millions, and the difficult decision to leave all that behind. He tells about one love and the distance, which was already too long to sustain. A bet of which he does not disavow, but that engraved his past under the hill with a noticeable nostalgia.

I take a look around me and, again, the sign on the door of his room: land of glaciers, with a picture of the Perito Moreno. I remember an environmentalist slogan that, in 2009, said: coal or glaciers. Glaciers are celebrated in the miner’s house. Reality is more complex than slogans. Just then another

layer of complexity is added: Ariel reflects on the direct pollution from the chimneys, which could be

5. On June 14, 2004, fourteen miners died after a fire in the conveyor belt that caused a collapse at Mina 5. See chapter “Survivors”

limited with limestone. He relativizes the climatic emissions that the mega mine would produce in comparison with those of cattle ranching in the hands of the great concentrated power, and states an unexpected testimony: “The old ones - as the workers call their senior coworkers - are against mining”. The only explosions took place during Taselli’s intervention in the nineties. From the access to the town, the blown up hill can still be seen. They, says Ariel, love their land and would not do any harm to it.

He also points out that there are still about one thousand nyc (born and raised) who are looking for work at YCRT. “Without work you cannot change the culture, nor can you think in the long term; from stability you can think about the future,” he says. Aware of the climate situation and the challenges this poses for coal burning, he considers that “if coal is not produced, the town will die”.

Ariel believes, just like his father does, that unionism must look after workers’ rights, adopting a front approach and anticipating the problems that lie ahead. He is aware of the climate situation and acknowledges the threat it poses to the coal industry. However, he believes that the current situation is even more threatening without the mega power plant, which would consume, as promised, 1.2 million tons of coal annually. “This would reactivate the activity and could make it profitable,” he wishes. Without that promise, the future he imagines is bleak.

THE BLACK ANGEL

Luis Gonzalez is a naturally born leader. He was an employee of YCRT since it was called Yacimientos Carboníferos Fiscales (YCF), and a historic union delegate of ATE. That is why, like all his colleagues, almost without exception, *the old ones* renamed him: Luis would be the *Black Little Angel*. “Angel” met me at the door of the company’s offices in Rio Gallegos, chatting with colleagues on the street, who scrutinized me from top to bottom. He pointed out that I was a few minutes late, and took me to the entrance of the center for retirees and pensioners, which he runs.

On several occasions he will call himself one of them, but “Angel” will weigh his history at different times. He will doubt and permanently test the knowledge (and intentions) of his interlocutor with names, data, dates and numbers. He will do this up to the point of dizziness. For him, everything has a why. My listening without cross-examination throws him off. My ignorance of his history and the insistence on the possibility of an “after coal”, even more so.

He tells about some of his multiple hunger strikes and questions the Kirchner family: “Lupo (for Néstor) supported the concession to Taselli”; “Cristina was against the clauses that protected workers”. He does not delve into his candidacy for provincial deputy in 2015 as part of the Civic Coalition, within the Cambiemos alliance. González was looking for alternatives, at least politically, for the development of the basin.

The “Black Angel” is a living testimony of the struggles that took place. He will remember the takeovers, campouts and even guitar-playing at the provincial Chamber of Deputies. The fight and dialogue with the local power -which, well into the 21st century, would consolidate its national importance- is for him common currency. To a great extent, he believes that this persistence achieved to improve their working conditions and to obtain conquests such as the 82% mobile salary or plane tickets so that the mining families could vacation in some sunny place in Argentina, to complement the lack of vitamin D caused by the permanent work in the mine. After years of certifying trips to Jujuy, the initiative ended up being a bargaining chip to reduce the working day from eight to six hours.

These days, YCRT workers are demanding the salary increases granted to other state employees during the government of Mauricio Macri (25% in 2017, 25% in 2018 and 28% in 2019). All investments go to the power plant, denounce the workers, since nothing gets to them. Río Turbio is synonymous with resistance.

For the “Black Angel”, there is no possible transition away from coal. However, he calculates that the sale of the electricity that could be generated by the thermoelectric plant would bring YCRT some 80 million dollars a year, while its annual maintenance cost is 120 million dollars. “Not even having the mega power plant working at full capacity will be enough to stop depending on the state”.

He vindicates, however, the Coal Congresses in which the workers reached the decision that the construction of the mega power plant is the way to give sustainability and economic reasonableness to coal extraction and he does not doubt for a second that it was the right decision to make. He wants me to check it out by talking to other leaders of the union fight. I tell him that I will do it, that the Center for Emergency Operations (COE for its Spanish acronym) has just authorized my entry -actually, that of any tourist with a negative antigen test and without quarantine- and that I will be leaving for Río Turbio as soon as we finish our talk. He takes his feet off the table, gets up and closes his presentation.

I leave the retirement center, the one with the greatest vitality I have ever visited in my life, just when I receive a message from one of those referents mentioned by “Angel”. It is Ricardo Bordón. He tells me that his partner had been in trouble with COVID-19 and that, that very morning, she had suffered a stroke. However, he says, we (he) will make the effort to meet. He wishes me a good stay, and welcomes me to the “Argentine capital of coal”.

3.2. THE CAPITAL OF COAL

*“Please take off your hat, sir,
a miner is going to pass by.
The man who parted the silence in the south,
the man who founded my town”.*

“A worker is going to pass by”, Eduardo Guajardo.

The GPS of the rented car with which I am traveling along Route 40, the longest route in Argentina, points to its southernmost end. I follow the recommendation made by Ernesto at the café in Gallegos: La ruta de la dignidad (The route of dignity), an album by Eduardo Guajardo with Claudio Sosa, becomes the soundtrack of the last kilometers to Río Turbio. On the sides of the asphalt, trees peeled and bent by the Patagonian winds, wildlife and autumn steppe. A constant zigzagging under the high voltage lines. The only thing interrupting the landscape is the blue and white mega-structure that hovers half-built on the left



Access road to the village, then YCF Avenue.

At the traffic circle, next to the unfinished and overbilled⁶ mass that will be the Río Turbio Thermoelectric Power Plant, a bronze Néstor Kirchner opens his arms, towering over a mountain of coal.

To my right, following the conveyor belts that go from Mina 5 to the sheds of the new thermoelectric power plant, an old building with gray walls and broken windows can be seen: it is the 21 MW power plant that operates at one third of its capacity and generates energy to extract the coal that will later be consumed. Seven kilometers ahead, the lights of the town embedded in the mountain range.

The 4 wheel drive trucks and rented cars do not usually get to see it. Most of them, coming from El Calafate or Río Gallegos, turn forty kilometers before to the border crossing of Cancha Carrera, the Argentinean dorsal of Torres del Paine, one of the main tourist attractions of the Chilean Patagonia.

Río Turbio, however, is not fallen off the map. It is not a well. It is a lively town, even in this already cold April and in the middle of a pandemic. Of simple architecture and intermittent plaster, it is built with its back to a lagoon full of southern flamingos and other birds in the immensity that limits with Chile. Far from a ski resort of singular beauty and surrounded by concessioned and abandoned cabins, Río Turbio only looks in one direction: the deposit that constituted it from an increasingly distant past.

The Ríoturbian map is an open book about its history. Its central square, Centenario del Carbón (Coal Centennial). It's YCF avenue, which gives access to the village and splits into the Miners Avenue and Agustín del Castillo Street.

6. See: https://wayback.archive-it.org/9650/20200215141409/http://p3-raw.greenpeace.org/argentina/Global/argentina/report/2010/cambio_climatico/disparate-economico-carbon-rio-turbio.pdf

The people of Río Turbio live in a present in a continual time in which everything revolves around an acronym; in the past it was YCF, today it is YCRT. *The company employs a number of workers that equals between 10 and 15 percent of the inhabitants.* Businesses on Los Mineros Avenue depend on the movement it generates. The hotels, even more so. However, YCRT has been intervened for years and only subsists thanks to direct transfers from the National State.

The town projects its future from the past that once was and, on a parallel lane, goes through small transitions that show a sensitivity and openness a priori unimaginable for the bitter Patagonian cold that refines its deep-rooted identity. But it vibrates. It trembles. It grows. Transitions of small-scale production, of patriarchal foundations that, as in every corner, begin to be questioned; of myths and superstitions that are shattered when a female miner hacks into the tunnel. When fossil masculinities get eroded in the heat of an era that demands more care than drilling.

Río Turbio is not alone. It is accompanied in its southerliness by the small town of Julia Dufour, next to the town access traffic circle. A few kilometers further south, the consolidated town of 28 de Noviembre, declared provincial capital of the Andean condor. Further on, where the vertical Argentine-Chilean border turns to the east, the Rospentek Aike Army post and the semi-abandoned Turbio Viejo, where the gravel road and the most absolute steppe begin. All these lands were owned by YCF and, over the years, were subdivided into the coal basin.

The mining village of Río Turbio was officially founded in December 1942, but the first solid structure was built in what would become the town only towards the end of the decade. It was more than half a century after the pioneer expeditions, such as that of Lieutenant Agustín del Castillo (1855-1889), who discovered the first coal outcrops in the area in February 1887, and the geologist Alcides Mercerat, who five years later deepened the exploration along the Santa Cruz River. An attempt was made, somewhat belatedly, to materialize the dream of mineral coal as the engine of the industrialization of the 19th century, in a clear decision to substitute the mineral imports coming from the United Kingdom, which were diminished by the impact of the World War II.

Thus, after the coup d'état of 1943, the de facto president Pedro Pablo Ramírez signed Decree 12,648⁷ creating the National Directorate of Solid Mineral Fuels. Thus began the experimental exploitation of Mina 1, with a small settlement installed where the Valdelén ski resort is located today. The workers will open Mina 1 with a pick and a shovel, without any major technology. Today the first ten meters of the old mine can be visited; a museum without a guide or access door. In the same fashion the hill will be drilled since 1947, with Mina 2, the year in which the State recognizes reserves equivalent to one million tons of mineral coal. Exultant with the findings, in 1950 they advanced with Mine 3, of greater depth and extension, and the purification plant was inaugurated, which is still in operation today. In August 1958, also by decree⁸, but already under the democratic government of Arturo Frondizi, YCF, the state company in charge of the exploitation and management of the coal basin, was created. Throughout some very turbulent decades, Río Turbio was born by and for coal. A deep-rootedness that, through the years, had its ups and downs and its moments of glory. In the current context, it is perhaps going through its most decisive years.

The sacrifice of the displaced workers, many of them from the northwestern provinces of Argentina such as La Rioja, Catamarca, Salta or Jujuy, was integrated with that of the significant majority of Chilean miners who arrived from the neighboring city of Puerto Natales, only thirty kilometers from the deposit. The fraternity of the tunnel, the long working days and the imminent danger united the workers. Almost exclusively men, from diverse geographies, constituting the isotypical figure of the commendable miner of whom Guajardo sings. A figure that, while revered, relegated the role of women who sustained home life between fear, loneliness and unconditional companionship⁹.

7. See: <http://mepriv.mecon.gov.ar/Normas/12648-43.htm>

8. See: <http://mepriv.mecon.gov.ar/Normas/3682-58.htm>

9. See the work of the photographer and producer Mariana Menna.

This identity, according to several workers, is also linked to a patriotic deed to inhabit -and defend- the southern frontier, bordering Chile, as well as to strengthen after the first Peronism and the Frondizist developmentalism a fossil industrialization according to the times of World War II, when an international distribution of labor was consolidated, centralizing the industrial power in the victors and relegating the Global South to the role of supplier of cheap raw materials. Others speak from working class consciousness and refer to an internationalist solidarity. The conception of identities varies, but in all cases clings strongly to the brotherhood of the old and the subterranean sacrifice that offers them an almost eternal night.

SURVIVORS

On the day of the tragedy, Ramón Páez did not have a black face. That day was one of the few days in which “Sietekilos” (Seven kilos), a nickname given to him by his elders because of his extreme thinness, had not gone to work. After a work week and the extra hours of the weekend, Ramón had decided to rest. The seventeen years that have passed since that day did not freeze the emotion that grips him when he names Nicolás Arancibia, Silverio Méndez, Víctor Hernández. He does not list victims, he evokes friends.



On June 14, 2004, fourteen workers got trapped at Mina 5. The fire started on the conveyor belt that transports the mineral from the bottom of the tunnel and spread steadily along five joints, accelerated by the methane gas given off by the deposit. The fire burned wooden beams and ceilings. The mountain collapsed.

Néstor Kirchner, already President of the Nation, traveled the following day. He spoke of a “terrible accident”. “Sietekilos” turned his back. “He arrived late,” he says. “We had been demanding investments and security measures for years. We had already stormed the municipalities of Turbio and of 28 de Noviembre, even the provincial Chamber of Deputies!” Paez recognizes that there have been advances, but he places them in the workers’ struggle. Kirchner, he concurs with the “Black Angel”, was an accomplice from the governorship of the decade of Taselli’s emptying, which left the company ruined in 2002. And once the company returned to the state orbit under the figure of intervention, he assures that Kirchner did nothing to improve its situation. Until tragedy struck.

In addition to speaking of an “accident”, which many workers consider a tragedy and others “an avoidable crime”, Kirchner looked for a way forward: he announced the construction of the mega-plant, a historical claim of the workers. After several back and forths about its power, he decided on 240 MW, which would require a coal production of 1,200,000 tons per year, a number that was only met at the historical peak of production, between 1978 and 1983. An appropriate carrot to get out of the commotion. A clever maneuver that “Sietekilos” would not end up believing. “From the nineties onwards, the company was a political hobbyhorse”.

Ramón Páez was born in La Rioja, son of a vintner father and brother of three other boys and five girls. He landed in Río Turbio at the age of fifteen and joined YCF in 1971, when its boom was still to come. He worked in the workshops until 1994 and since then, and until 2013, he worked as a gallery miner. These were not his first experiences in the adit. During the dictatorship, beyond the role that each one had, the workers had to enter the mine to increase extraction. “Sietekilos” enjoyed it. It was his favorite job. “I liked to go out with a black face,” he says shyly, as if confessing an intimacy.

Paez does not think that there is any other destiny for the town than the extraction of coal. He does imagine a carbochemical company. He highlights forty-three coal derivatives and supposes that, perhaps, in addition to energy, there is a path in alternative industries.

In order to think about tourism, he says, too much infrastructure is needed. But, above all, to change the mindset of the people. Just like other of his colleagues, he fears the ghost of Sierra Grande: the town that grew up in the heat of iron ore mining and collapsed due to a presidential decree in 1991, which ended production without any social policy to cushion the impact. Sierra Grande is everything that Río Turbio will not allow itself to be. It is the best example of the lack of transition.

In addition to the commemorative plaques for his years of service, the mine occupations in 1991, 1994 and 2001 and several militant trips to the provincial capital, Ramón accumulates a stain on his right lung and a diminished hearing capacity. These are the consequences of years in the mine and of his ears struggling to get used to the 120 uninterrupted decibels of the pneumatic hammers. On the day he receives me at his home, Ramón has an appointment to be vaccinated against COVID-19; he gets Sputnik. He is in an at-risk group and his health matters to him. He wears a blue animal print mask that is too big for him. He will continue to go to ATE assemblies, because neither his home nor a retirement center are capable of stopping him.

* * *

Ricardo Bordón receives me a few minutes after finishing an assembly at the ATE headquarters, on Los Mineros Avenue, very close to a Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. His partner is now stabilized. Hospitalized in Córdoba, her COVID-19's condition had been mild, but the stroke kept them on edge. “Those were days of great anguish,” Ricardo wrote to me on WhatsApp the day before. Nevertheless, he does not miss the union meeting or his commitment to meet with me.

Bordón wears casual jogging pants and a fleece jacket, with thick-framed glasses. The impressive figure at the table is that of Adonis Rojas, a classical union leader of great size, gray hair and a commanding voice. Adonis talks about the housing crisis in the basin, outlines possible solutions. Ricardo stays on the sidelines and when he speaks, he speaks softly. Everyone is silent to listen to him. Bordón welcomes me, before the attentive gaze of five peers who had participated in the assembly. “Sietekilos” is one of them.

A political animal and a connoisseur of terminology, Adonis interrupts me when I talk about just transition. He tells me he was in Katowice, Poland, accompanying coal miners who were part of the drafting of the Silesia Declaration, an initiative of the Polish government that organized

COP24-the 2018 United Nations climate summit-in a town with a historic coal mining tradition. This declaration was criticized by environmentalists who felt that it only linked the concept of justice to longer deadlines for the transition, something that would be incompatible with the objectives of the Paris Agreement.

Immediately, other comrades intervene. “What is the south for porteño (Buenos Aires’) centralism?” asks someone. “The backyard,” replies another. The only real sustenance, they agree, is coal to promote energetic and national sovereignty. “Diversification is a *taradiddle*”, someone anticipates.

“The tourist potential is a fairy tale, it’s a rich man’s look,” Adonis believes. The table raises the decibels, while Ramón and Ricardo remain silent. Every now and then they nod. I was invited to see the symphony of a feeling. It is played by the words, the tone and the strength with which these leaders of the most important union in the coal basin express themselves. The pieces move and do not admit any castling.

They are also critical. “Four power plants were stolen and the people have no homes,” says one. They denounce that violence is growing due to overcrowding and that this is a product of corruption. “The graft that is going on is holding back housing,” they declare, holding the municipal government jointly responsible. Although almost nobody mentions it, corruption is there. The overpricing, the fiasco of the intervention of the Spanish company (now bankrupt) Isolux Corsán, the enrichments are admitted. However, it does not appear in the local collective imagination as it does in the view from Buenos Aires. There, their struggles are vindicated, with their conquests and defeats. Corruption is not seen as a problem of the workers, but of politics.

Almost without being able to get a word in edgewise, the assembly’s after-dinner talk continues to cover all the points that could have been asked. That “we do not use cyanide as they do in Famatina”, that “we are the only mining company in the hands of the State”, that “the air in Buenos Aires is more polluted than that of Río Turbio” and that “the cows of the landowners generate more damage to the climate” than their activity. The delegates know what they are doing and what they are saying. That is why even Bordón, before inviting me to leave, will consider that the future of the basin is to become an energy pole. “It’s this or nothing,” Adonis will say in farewell.

* * *

In front of the pavilions that are still standing at the entrance to the village, Ricardo and Ramón walk together. They move forward a few meters to talk without being overheard. Perhaps they share stories about their past in those dirt corridors. I see them retracing those years. They talk very close; they walk almost without taking off their feet. They stir up memories and, at one point, they point to a pavilion: “That’s where I lived when I arrived,” Ramón will say, as he keeps on pointing at it.

At the entrance to the old neighborhood, next to the access to the town, stands a monument to the miner. They unwillingly pose for a photo and immediately approach the plaque bearing the names of the fourteen victims. In line with the coldness chosen by then President Kirchner, the plaque recalls the “list of agents who fell in the 2004 accident”. Their file numbers are inscribed next to their names. A telegraphic memento, which Ricardo and Ramón will look at closely, pausing at each name.

Bordón joined the company a year after Páez did. He always carried out administrative work. “I was physically weak, but I compensated it with spiritual strength,” he confesses. He manifested that strength and his political expertise in ATE’s internal affairs. He believes that the company has something “almost mystical” in relation to the fraternity it generates. He is critical of Kirchnerism for its role during Taselli’s intervention and considers that it contributed to the depoliticization of the workers’ movement in the years that followed. He distrusts as well the political opportunism involved in the construction of the mega-plant, but notes it down as a victory for the workers.

When they look at each other, Ricardo and Ramón are accomplices of a resistance for the national industry of the last century. They celebrate, together, having shared a pavilion with the Chilean exiles of the Pinochet dictatorship. They also celebrate having thrown Taselli out; because they consider that the victory was also over the International Monetary Fund’s plan. They possess a geopolitical awareness and know that the struggle for their collective rights is inserted in an international framework. Even so, global decarbonization does not seem, as yet, to concern them. They do not think it is a struggle of their generation.

HOPS OR MINING

It is half past three in the morning when Maximiliano Gómez closes the door of the factory that will become a brewery. After showing me his sanctuary, he walks with me to the apart hotel where I sleep. That had been my first night in town and I still did not know its irregular layout; my sensation was that of an absolute foreigner: an intruder observing its nooks and crannies and inquiring about its future.

In this brewery, which will soon open to the public, Maximiliano produces Pionera (Pioneer) beer. A tribute to Admiral Agustín del Castillo. The labels even bear the legend “National Coal Capital”. Everything in his beer transpires Rioturbian identity. I buy a liter of black IPA from him; he gives me the bottle and a bag with the brand’s logo. Maxi knows what he is doing. He wants the name of his beer to reach everywhere. The identity that labels a productive model different from the local hegemony.

Maxi is the only one of the men in his family who does not work for the company. He left at the age of eighteen to study political science and international relations at the Catholic University of La Plata and ran the social and cultural magazine La Carbonera. He returned to the town with an idea that was widespread in the big cities, but not so much explored in his hometown. He returned to open a brewery and to continue his career in the media -he is the face of the midday news and every morning he hosts one of the most listened programs in one of the few local private radio stations-.

He returned as well to build a political alternative that seeks to renew the leadership of the local chieftains. While starting his small-scale production, Gómez was a candidate for councilman for the SER party, aligned with Claudio Vidal, general secretary of the Santa Cruz Oil and Gas Union. He did not get in. Several traditional referents discouraged him, asking him why he would go as “an outsider”. He was confident in his bet. So much so that when he was left out, he took it as a sign to focus on Pionera, to open the factory to the public and generate employment in the area. Nevertheless, he continues to militate for this political idea that he believes to be one of renewal.

A few years back, in La Plata, while looking for a jacket in a clothing store, Maxi had a premonition. He left the rack he was looking at and walked out the store. He ran into a friend with whom he was studying and when he told him what he had felt, he received an incredulous laugh in response. Also the challenge: come on, you’ll see that you’re going crazy, there’s no need to, let’s go, it’s on the way to uni (short for university). And they went. Patrol cars surrounded the place from which Maxi had fled without knowing why. They were told that an armed man had entered and attempted to break into the cash register. The police had arrived quickly and the thief had escaped. “Tell me what number I should bet on tomorrow’s lottery,” his friend joked, with a mixture of surprise and denial.

Since then, he believes in his intuitions. That was why, upon his return, he challenged the family legacy without being confrontational, but rather building alternatives, without losing his identity.

His father, Julio, and his brothers did not take him seriously. For a while, they stopped talking to him. When Pionera began to prosper, to be sold in local stores and even in other parts of the province, the conflict subsided. The Maxi that the men in his family had imagined ceased to exist. A new walker was born, with an uncertain future.

“I think post-industrial tourism is a definite possibility for the town when coal is left behind,” he will imagine after several re-questions. “Visits to abandoned mines are a boom in different parts of the world; if we complement it by renovating the ski slope and promoting ourselves better in the world, tourism could be a good source of income. Together with agriculture and small productive projects, it could give us a chance”. Maxi outlines horizons. He makes no assurances, but he envisions potential tomorrows.

On the walk back, he assures to me that, although at the beginning it was difficult to leave YCRT's mandate, now he feels fulfilled and his family is with him. One of his brothers even asked him what it was like to ferment barley and what it took to dare start a business.

THE TURBIO FEMALES

"I hacked the system," says Carla Antonella Rodriguez, proudly, at the table in her house. "I dressed as a guy for the interview and, since I still hadn't changed my ID, they sent me to the tunnel. When I was effective, they didn't take me out anymore." Carla beat the system, but, above all, she overthrew superstition. According to the miners' popular imagination, women can only enter the mine on December 4, the day of Saint Barbara, patron saint of miners. The bad omen of a woman entering on any other day could be lethal. For the past ten years, Carla has entered Mina 5 every working day.

During the three months of probation, she kept silent. She endured insults, mockery and machiruleadas (macho jibes) from some of her coworkers. "They were not the generality," she recalls. "When I got on the bus, already inside the mine, a colleague shouted 'faggot' at me. I got up from my seat, blocked the exit and asked him to show me who was the biggest faggot on the bus". She remembers the laughter of her coworkers and the support she has received ever since.

Carla laughingly tells and cautiously analyzes. She reviews an anecdote, not normality. Ricardo Bordón, an ATE leader since the 1980s, thinks that "Carlita shows that women can work in the mine". It seems that her history has cracked history. She is suspicious: "Nothing has changed, the patriarchal culture is still the same and feminist sisterhood sometimes leaves a lot to be desired". Despite her critical view, she believes she has found in most of her coworkers an important support to continue working on what she likes while militating to expand the rights of the LGBTIQ+ collective.

That was how she lived it after 2012 when, under the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the National Congress passed the Gender Identity Law. Her records continued to reflect her dead name, but she believed that changing it could mean a work-related problem. The support of friends and fellow activists encouraged her to move forward. The day she brought her rectified document, the bureaucracy was very simple. However, once the file had been updated, the warning came: "You will have to go (to work) to the surface".

That battle has been going on ever since, between the threats of relocation and the demand, on her part, that the reasons be given to her signed in writing. Machismo and superstition cannot find a legal framework to remove her from the mine. If they do, the discrimination complaint could cost them their jobs and, surely, a media scandal that no one wants to take on.

* * *

Erika Halvorsen is a film director from Santa Cruz, a friend of Carla's for many years. In addition to feature films such as *El hilo rojo* (The Red Thread) and *Desearás al hombre de tu hermana* (You Will Desire your Sister's Man), Halvorsen wrote a chronicle in *Revista Anfibia* entitled "La reina del carbón" (The Queen of Coal). There, she tells one of the most unexpected stories of the Rioturbian mineshaft. Erika writes that the dreams of the girls in her childhood were limited to being chosen as queens at the Santa Barbara celebration. There was no horizon beyond beauty.

In *Río Turbio*, the film by filmmaker and director Tatiana Mazú, Vanesa, one of the interviewees, believes that "it is difficult for them to recognize that maybe we women are more than just women".

And adds: “Men are a little bit afraid that we women can do something that they think they are the only ones capable of doing”.

I think of a quote from Antigua and Barbuda’s climate change ambassador to the United Nations, Diann Black-Layne: “The main obstacle [to mitigating climate impacts] is not money, it’s not technology, and it’s not political will: it’s the fear of a male-dominated industry of losing its power.”

Mazú’s film traces the story of the women who resisted in the mine takeovers during the privatization adventure led by Taselli and, especially, the campouts and protests during the firings carried out by Omar Zeidán. Women cared for, fed and, above all, they put their bodies into it. They had a leading role that immediate history would not recognize.

Likewise, photographer and audiovisual producer Mariana Menna, who has been working on a project called “Mothers of Coal” for the last few years, also expresses herself along these lines. In the documentary, which she has not yet finished, she explores the hidden face of the mine-related development of the town. “The silence of anonymity, the other face of ‘development,’” as Menna puts it.

* * *

“I am not a miner because I was born a female, I had no other possible destiny”, Menna says when she bursts into Carla’s house unannounced. Bordón had told her that I would be meeting Carla and decided to go to her friend’s home with a notebook where she kept record of the stories she had documented. She also brought a camera and snapped a few shots while Carla shyly covered her face. She will talk louder and ask more questions than I did. She will tell of her travels in Argentina and Europe. She will say that moving opens one’s head, and that people need to move. She will say that she is a feminist forcibly, for being a woman in a mining town. She will say, with Carla’s complicity, that they are “the turbid females of Turbio”.

Carla believes that Erika’s embodies the only recognition of her struggle. She does not say this with resignation; she does not want to win laurels. She lives her story for herself, not for others. She does wish that deconstructions were faster and that the LGBTIQ+ collective’s right to equal access to work would be expedited. Since I spoke with her at her home, until the closing of this report, the National Congress approved the so-called Transvestite-Trans Labor Quota Law. In the social networks, Carla celebrates the victory and hopes that this will bring her closer to having more trans women colleagues in YCRT.

She understands, perhaps more than any of her coworkers, that transitions do not happen from one day to the next, nor do they happen by means of divine grace. She knows that they are walked through with sacrifice and, many times, against the will of a context, even an intimate one, which does not accompany feelings but clings to preconceptions. Carla has endured difficult times, but in small symbols she feels a sense of reparation. Like the day her father gave her money to buy a dress for herself, or when he publicly defended her from mockery in the company’s workshops.

Transitions are hard, but it is harder to go through them in solitude. Support, not only from the inner circle but also from a State that is present, empathetic and sensitive, is necessary to promote identity paths that are different from the norm. Carla defends coal, like most of her coworkers, because she believes that it is what gives life to the town. However, she understands that it is a turning point - or rather a “bridge” - to a horizon that she does not know, but in which she claims to participate. “If there is no future in coal, let them offer possible futures”, she will affirm.

I tell her about a study exploring petromasculinities¹⁰ and she laughs, as if so much analysis were unnecessary. In the study, the author, Cara Daggett, finds that “the concept of petromasculinities suggests that fossil fuels mean more than profit; fossil fuels also contribute to developing identities, which poses

10. Ver: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0305829818775817>

risks for energy policies beyond carbon dioxide". She associates this with the rise of new authoritarian right-wingers who enhance the idea of the "fossil male," such as Donald Trump in the United States, on whom she focuses her work. Daggett thinks that the intersection between gender and energy remains understudied.

The coal culture is identitarily macho," agrees Carla. Mariana interrupts with a shout: "The day this town crowns a transvestite as Queen of Coal, the mine will collapse!

Vanesa Galván was fired on her birthday. After eleven years at YCRT, on January 24, 2018, she received the notice with the inter-ventor, Omar Zeidán, as the sender -a man raised in the town who, after his days in office, had to leave it amid graffiti and threats. In April, after three months of sustained and collective struggle, Vanesa was reinstated.

She reckons that after the reinstatements no more thought was given to what would happen if the mine closed down. What are we going to do if they turn it over to gas? she asks. "We only know how to be miners," she replies. "The town will die," she says.

He has four brothers and five children, all boys. Blessed are you, Vanessa. The first electromechanics in the company. The latter are still too young. As a mother, she wants them to study. She wants them to open their minds and learn about other horizons. "I would die if they became miners," she says shamelessly. She does not disown, she imagines a different future.



Vanesa Galván with her pink helmet and YCRT jacket on Avenida de los Mineros.

Vanesa works at the company's wastewater treatment plant. She is a delegate of the second strongest union after ATE: the Asociación del Personal Superior (APS). A controversial union - illegal, according to some ATE members - which brings together some 700 hierarchical workers, from department heads upwards. Vanesa and two colleagues are the only women among the thirty APS delegates. She is also one of the two hundred female employees in a company with more than two thousand workers. One in ten, the apparent constant.

"I'm not going to be ordered around by a woman." She hears it over and over again, increasingly less so. Occasionally, subordinates will kick desks, shout or throw papers onto the floor. The bottled-up anger overflows. It shows. Complaints of workplace violence, too, but they do not come out.

The crisis of Zeidán's firings in January 2018 broke something and brought something else together. Women of the Coal was born, an alliance between municipal workers, company workers and family members, in the defense of jobs. Many times, that income is the only sustenance for their families. The traditional miners see the strength of this collective and recognize it. Vanesa believes that the 2018 strike bridged an intersectional bridge, united trades, roles and genders. "A new generation was born," some will consider. The defense of coal is indisputable, but in the "how" and especially in the "who", something began to change.

* * *

A female municipal worker, let's call her N, singles out Vanessa for breaking the glass ceiling. For showing that women can also do more than just janitorial or administrative tasks. She celebrates her as she celebrates Carla, two women who managed to break the destinies that the culture, both of the town and of the company, had reserved for them. To overcome the secondary role of partners of the commendable miner, of mothers of those children whose destiny was written. To begin to leave behind the agony of the wait and the silent return.

N also feels that "if there is no coal, the town is lost". She highlights that over the years solidarity dissipated: "*Chalk and coal*, the emblem of the teachers' and miners' union, was left behind by the arrogance and lack of comradeship of some who progressed economically". "Money clouds their minds," someone else will say.

Although she was born in a province in northwestern Argentina, it has been forty years since N last visited. "I'm in love with Río Turbio," says the mother who cooked at the 2018 strikes, as part of the Women of the Coal. She wanted to convene the family, organize activities; to keep the town alive still -and especially- in resistance. She believes that when someone opens up to the community, the community does so with them. Mobilizing and transforming is not a process of vertical imposition, but of joint learning. She plays her role, understands and listens. Every afternoon, she goes for a walk in the mountains in search of new sunsets.

FROM MIERES WITH LOVE

Intendant Dario Menna receives me in his office on a Saturday morning. That night I have to take the plane back from El Calafate. It is the last day before the restrictions to enter Río Turbio without a mandatory seven-day quarantine are in force again.

The interview was delayed due to the caution of his private secretary, Oscar Rodríguez, who investigated some homonymous journalists, such as a colleague of Clarín who has my name and, based on those findings, postponed the interview. Only after some insistence, after giving him some names of the people I had talked to and clarifying that I had never worked for the multimedia, he gave me that appointment at the end of the tour: the last word would have to come from politics.

The Municipality looks deserted, except for those two men. The mayor smokes tobacco and drinks mate. He speaks with confidence. He says what politics can say: that "coal is everything", that it is energy for the whole country and economy for the whole basin, that it is an act of sovereignty and that the mega power plant will define the future of the next twenty or thirty years of the region. He also dreams of the installation of an industrial cluster that could take advantage of the "cheap" energy that the new plant would provide. All, he assures, with strict environmental control and an enormous added value for the local and national economy.



Flamencos australes en el dique San José.

Menna also outlines, although with less conviction, that tourism in the area should be greatly enhanced with the ski slope in Valdelén, the Club Andino cabins, the healthy trails that cross the Bosque de Duendes on the way to the Chilean border and the promotion of aquatic activities in the San José dam. He acknowledges that private investment is growing, but at too slow a pace to offer solutions. He describes a hidden Turbio, which has shades of Villa La Angostura and nuances of Traslasierra. Lagoons, hills and flamingos; ski slopes in the middle of the mountain range: a very complete brochure. Nevertheless, that Turbio has its back turned to the vanishing point that gets all the attention (and investments): the YCRT monster. Convinced or not, Menna acknowledges: “Transformations take time, but we have to kick-start”.

Twice will Menna remember his origins. His grandfather was a coal miner in Mieres, Asturias. He shared a mine shaft with the grandparents of Aníbal Fernández, until then YCRT’s controller. The mayor’s paternal grandfather arrived in Buenos Aires in 1962, after the Asturias mining strike that confronted the Franco regime. Franco’s dictatorship responded with violence, torture and deportation. Grandfather Menna managed to reach Buenos Aires, where his father-in-law lived. In four months, he got a job in Río Turbio and settled there permanently.

Asturias is today one of the most challenging focal points for the Institute for a Just Transition, which reports to the Spanish government’s Ministry of Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge. With the participation of workers, trade unions, electricity companies and regional governments, the plan promotes investments in alternatives such as geothermal energy, green hydrogen, tourism promotion and environmental remediation. At the close of this report (September 2021), it counts out with funds approved for 70 million euros, almost twice as much as the region of Castile and León, the second with the most resources committed by the central government. In the origins of the intendant’s sounds an alarm about what is to come.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The climate and ecological crisis is unequivocally anthropogenic, the product of an unsustainable and inequitable production and consumption model. To avoid worse impacts, it is necessary to begin with a technological transformation in the energy sector. Science has already shown that the path needed to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C during this century requires that the use of coal be phased out in the upcoming years.

The way in which these transformations are carried out can determine the lives of millions of people. Following the emissions reduction path outlined by climate science without incorporating the potential social impacts can both aggravate inequity and delay the necessary transformations - due to the expected popular resistance. Science shows how to mitigate the ecological crisis. Politics must cushion the impact on the social fabric and transform the reconversion into new alternatives for the majorities.

For towns such as Río Turbio, built on fossil hegemonies, these transitions may pose an existential threat in the short or medium term. However, the approach attempted in this report shows that workers face other priorities. They do not imagine alternatives, largely because of the productive uniqueness that defined their history. Questioning their main economic activity implies for them a questioning of their identity.

Energy transitions do not appear in the Rioturbian imaginary. However, the mining village is going through simultaneous transitions and of a different nature. The emergence of small artisanal productions, the challenge to political traditions and, especially, the questioning of patriarchal structures, begin to find room. These transformations imply new approaches that crack and redefine the seemingly unbridgeable collective identity.

Transitions are not without associated costs. Without a State that carefully and empathetically plans and accompanies them, the costs may be too high, especially for workers. A purely technocratic approach, as well as the repetition of a slogan that does not incorporate territorial visions, could replicate the fear mentioned on several occasions: the ghost of Sierra Grande. Resistance would be inevitable.

The narratives explored in this report allow us to imagine the distance and complexity of this task. Also, that there are transitions that are already underway, both in terms of production and culture, as well as those of workers' organization or environmental awareness. These experiences transmitted by the neighbors of a town forged in the heat of the pick and shovel allow us to dismantle the stereotype of the impermeable figure that the miner represents in the urban imaginary. Today, miners are undergoing profound changes that are also part of the change of an era.

When both female and male miners resist, they cling to what is known. "The important thing is to stay; by staying we achieve what we achieve," says an interviewee in the film Río Turbio, directed by Tatiana Mazú. That permanence is that of the plate of food on the table for the family, the small renovation in the house or the collective belonging. It will be easier to speak of resilience when options abound. The sixteen thousand people who live in El Turbio have never known an alternative. They cannot be asked to leap into the void.

In the exercise of imagining possible bridges, it is evident that these towns require, above all, the empathy of local, provincial and national governance, in order to think of localized and effective policies that address their particularities.

YCRT has been, and continues to be, the recipient of millions of state subsidies, despite (or as a result of) corruption and economic unsustainability. It is not a question of thinking about whether the State accompanies Río Turbio economically -something that is already happening- but about how to do so in line with the challenges that the people will face in the years to come. State ownership of the company can be an opportunity for the common good to prevail, promoting dialogues to build possible futures, in line with national commitments on climate change.

There may not be a recipe for the Just Transition, in capital letters and singular. Therefore, the State will have to explore a multiplicity of factors, geographies and transversalities to find the best way to catalyze the transitions that are already taking place, as well as to guide and accompany those others that still do not see a horizon.

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