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This is how England hid the abuses (and the dead) of the almighty Río Tinto Company in Huelva in 1888

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The abuse against the inhabitants and workers of the Riotinto Company Limited began in 1873 and lasted until no less than 1954. More than three-quarters of a century in which the First Republic, the Bourbon Restoration, the Primo de Rivera dictatorship survived, the Second Republic and the Civil War until the middle of the Franco period. But what was that powerful multinational and to whom did it belong so that it could keep the different Spanish governments at bay, despite the irreparable damage it caused to the region?



It all started with the ruined presidency of Nicolás Salmerón, who sold the famous Riotinto copper mines for 92 million pesetas to an international conglomerate. This constituted the sadly famous company of British origin that, by abusing and exploiting the native population, changed the socioeconomic aspect of the entire province of Huelva.

Until then, its inhabitants survived from agriculture and fishing, but when the English arrived, the owners and main managers of this company, the province became part of international trade networks. That in principle brought great benefits and the greatest technological innovations of the time, such as the railway. But it also marked the beginning

of a great number of ecological, labor and health problems for the inhabitants of Riotinto and many other surrounding towns, such as Nerva and Zalamea.

Such was the power it accumulated and the ability to operate within Spain with its workers, as if it were a business government within a national government, that the Rio Tinto Company Limited went so far as to establish a sort of South African-style “Apartheid” without no public authority will spoil his conduct. On the one hand, the multinational managers who came from Great Britain along with many other workers with a more technical profile, who settled in Bellavista, a luxury neighborhood built by them from scratch and separated by an impassable wall. And on the other, the population and the more than 10,000 miners who worked in the fields, who lived in precarious houses, seeing how their crops were ruined and their health suffered from the toxic fumes generated by work.

Riotinto Company Limited

The arrival of the Riotinto Company Limited, which was the largest open pit mine in the world, is explained within an international context in which the massive arrival of large foreign companies took place in the Huelva mining basin. It was the Second Industrial Revolution and that brought a lot of work, since the industry consumed a large amount of minerals throughout the planet. As a consequence, mining operations were modernized and expanded in many places.

The difference is that this area offered a very valuable alternative for entrepreneurs: it had large reserves of non-ferrous metals in an economically backward country, which allowed them to lower operating costs and wages. That was a huge saving and a huge profit margin that allowed them to build a large group of Victorian houses and even a Presbyterian church that are still standing.

What is left no trace today in Rio Tinto is one of the more than a hundred dead – including women, children and the elderly, as well as workers – who left their lives in the considered first ecological manifestation in the history of Spain. Neither tombs, nor plaques, nor monuments to the memory of the miners and farmers who united to protest, on February 4, 1888, against the miserable living conditions imposed by the British and against the havoc caused by the strong emanations of dioxide of sulfur in their lands and in their health, after burning minerals in the open air.

The black cloud

The reason was the procedure used to obtain the copper, known as “artificial cementation” or “teleras”. It consisted of placing tons of mineral in large heaps outdoors and pinning them on dry branches, as can be seen in the image. Those small mountains released sulfur during combustion, to obtain pure copper, and a gigantic amount of sulfurous gases. Bonfires burned uninterruptedly for six to twelve months a year, releasing about 500 tons of toxic fumes into the air.

The enormous black cloud that formed over the sky over Riotinto, Nerva and other nearby villages, popularly called “the blanket”, generated highly harmful effects for agriculture and for the health of the inhabitants. Many people fled the town in search of cleaner air, as crops were practically the only source of wealth for those who were not engaged in mining. The situation became unsustainable and intolerable.

The discontent soon spread to twenty other towns in the area, to which was added the accumulated anger of the miners regarding their working conditions: salary discounts, the payment of the company doctor to others, the continued loss jobs with the slightest excuse (including illness) or loss of money caused by the days of “blanket”, in which they could only work half the day and paid less.

Anti-Humanist League

Farmers and their supporters came to form the “Anti-Humanist League,” which criticized the abuses committed by the Rio Tinto Company in the mine processes and demanded its replacement by others. But the company had too much power, to the point of establishing itself as a true colonial authority in the area for 81 years. They had the administration under their protection to support their argument that, given the conditions of the mineral in the mines and the international situation, they could not afford another system that would give them benefits.

The problem of calcination caught the local press during 1887 and 1888. Controversies between the “anti-humanists” and the defenders of mining, whom they held responsible for the development and prosperity of the area for attracting population from abroad, were continuous. “The increase in population was indeed very notable, but the argument put forward was unsustainable: the population went to where there was work, and in the mines there was, but the extraction and processing of the mineral did not necessarily have to be linked to calcination system that, in fact, was prohibited in all countries of the world, including in neighboring Portugal, since 1878. And, of course, in England, “said María Dolores Ferrero, from the University of Huelva, in her study” The conflicts of February 1888 in Rio Tinto. Different versions of events ».

The sum of all these discontents culminated in the famous demonstration of February 4, 1888, which went down in history as “The year of the shooting.” A massacre whose magnitudes, 132 years later, have not yet been fully clarified. But it was not easy, since we were talking about the most powerful company in Spain at that time. A company that, in addition, had brought the First Republic out of bankruptcy by selling the exploitation rights. It was not convenient to make public what had happened there.

The Pavia Regiment

On February 1, the miners’ strike began, which grew over the next two days. At the same time, farmers affected by sulfur dioxide, with the people of Zalamea in the lead, began to prepare a march on Rio Tinto to call for the suspension of calcination. On day 4, both demonstrations met at the entrance to the town and decided to unite to march to the Plaza del Ayuntamiento. The established slogans were clear: «Down with the fumes! We just want justice! Long live agriculture! ».

When the leaders came up to speak to the mayor to negotiate, he did not dare to make any decision due to the pressure they received from the company. Then came the civil governor of Huelva, Agustín Bravo, to put order. First, he refused to allow the local government to suppress the calcination, and then he went out on the balcony to rebuke the thousands of protesters gathered. After him came the lieutenant colonel of the Pavia Regiment, who had arrived in the town at the request of reinforcements. It was then that the unexpected happened.

Suddenly, a first discharge was heard without anyone knowing where it came from or who had given the order. Then new point-blank shocks followed, and then officers began attacking with bayonets. In fifteen minutes the ground was littered with dead and wounded. The next day, some local and national newspapers echoed the event. “El Socialista”, “La Provincia”, “El Cronista de Sevilla”, “La Época”, “El Liberal”, “La Iberia” and “La República”, among others. The number of those who lost their lives varied between the thirty given by the first and the more than fifty by the last.

“Thirteen corpses identified and buried”

According to the witnesses of the time, however, these were between one hundred and two hundred, whose bodies were thrown into the dumps or in the old abandoned mines to leave no trace. And the wounded, cared for in secret in their own houses, in terrible conditions, for fear of taking them to hospitals. That is what concluded the research work of Alfredo Moreno Bolaños and Juan Manuel Pérez López, “Reliable testimonies about the train of death” (2008), which speaks of between 150 and 200 people killed.

«The Governor came out on the balcony the first time and asked the workers if they agreed with their wages. They replied that it was not. He went out again and said that he would see the director of the mines and that the next day he would know the result. The workers said they had been unemployed for three days and wanted to know the result as soon as possible. He went out again a third time, with Lieutenant Colonel of the Pavia Regiment and the people, believing he was going to say something, remained silent as at mass. Then the misfortunes occurred ”», would tell «El Socialista» days later.

The message that the civil governor of Huelva sent to the Minister of the Interior in Madrid on February 6 said: «Thirteen bodies identified and buried. Twelve recognized wounded. No foreigner, woman or child has been injured. The newspaper of “The Republican Coalition”, however, detailed. “When the most joyous were the protesters

huddled in the narrow adjacent streets and the plaza, in more than 12,000 numbers, they sent for the cavalry to be withdrawn. Immediately afterwards, an immense and closed discharge, whose projectiles swept away that human mass, put the crowd in disorderly flight, leaving many corpses and wounded on the ground, and hit the streets, screaming in terror and violent anger. Who gave the fire order? Until now it is not known. Was it the governor? Was it the military chief? (...) With the testimony of hundreds of people, we can affirm that the protesters did not utter a subversive cry, no provocation or act came out of them that bothered the troops or the authorities. ”

Only a letter to the editor published in “La Provincia” dared to say that “the Zalamea demonstration was one of monstrous violence.” The versions of the remaining newspapers agreed that there was no provocative attitude and argued that “if the purposes had been threatening, the protesters would not have put innocent women and children before the bullets of the soldiers.”

In the books of the sentences of the Huelva Hearing from 1888 to 1892 there was no information about it, according to Ferreo’s investigations. Nor in the Madrid Supreme Court. The Spanish Courts barely discussed the incident and it was said that the dead did not exceed 14, although the majority of testimonies defend that they far exceeded one hundred. The Rio Tinto Civil Registry only counted thirteen deaths from “external bleeding” or “internal bleeding”.