

The “Blood Diamond” of Electric Batteries: Stop the Exploitation Behind Green Energy

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In the global push toward combatting climate change and identifying clean energy sources, including promoting the use of clean energy vehicles, the environmental community has so far overlooked a largely hidden problem that is a key aspect of this shift in energy sourcing: economic exploitation the likes of which would never be tolerated in most industrialized countries.

There are legitimate reasons for this. For one thing, the overwhelming focus has been on moving the needle on energy policy to effectively combat climate change -- a man-made phenomenon that literally endangers every living thing on Earth – in the face of significant corporate and political opposition in part fueled by naysayers who deny for their own ends mounting scientific evidence of a global problem and an existential threat. For another, the exploitation does not occur under our noses, but in a distant African country. But we in America benefit from it nonetheless.

Many proponents of clean energy policy and their allies in the environmental community have yet to focus on a dirty little secret related to the production of Zero Emission Vehicles (ZEVs), which are often powered chiefly by electricity. Their power plants are dependent on electric batteries, and the production of these batteries is in turn dependent on the mining of cobalt, a strategic metal found in various ores that helps prevent batteries from overheating and extends the range of electric vehicles.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, the largest nation in Central Africa, is the largest producer of cobalt in the world. Cobalt has become known as “the blood diamond of batteries” due to its high price on the open market and the perilous working conditions under which it is often mined, conditions that would never be tolerated by the United Mine Workers of America. These include violations of child labor laws which are rarely enforced; makeshift mines devoid of safety regulations to protect workers, where some have died in narrow tunnels prone to collapse; a total lack of safety equipment; and wages that are the equivalent of less than \$10 a day, just enough for the miners to feed their families and send their children to school, but not enough for health care or any sense of economic security. When they sell the cobalt they’ve mined, they have reason to complain of being cheated by the mining interests who buy their product, for they are paid in cash and there is no standardization of pricing. Retirement programs after decades of back-breaking work are non-existent.

What is truly disturbing is that the Congo’s “anything goes” mining practices, within an underworld mining syndicate that exists alongside legitimate international mining companies, placing ill-equipped workers at risk of injury or death on any given day, are supporting the Zero Emissions Vehicle industry. The “blood diamond of batteries” reputation has auto

manufacturers scrambling to find alternatives to cobalt in electric battery production, due to concerns about consumer blowback.

California is in a unique position to change the paradigm of Third World exploitation given that a portion of the California Air Resources Board (CARB's) greenhouse gas reduction investment is focused on vehicles fueled by cobalt batteries. Imagine what would happen if the fifth largest economy in the world (California) signaled it planned to shift investment elsewhere because of human exploitation.

There could be dual benefits. In February 2021, the [State Auditor reported](#) that CARB is at risk of missing its future emission reduction deadlines. Perhaps CARB could invest more aggressively in non-electric green technologies such as natural gas, green hydrogen, and carbon sequestration that can immediately reduce emissions and reduce pressure for cobalt.

What if we could achieve clean energy *without* the criminal exploitation and endangerment of people of color in non-industrialized countries?

We believe we can. If there is any torch to be passed to the environmentalists of the 21st Century, this is it.