

Throwing stones at a giant:

Meaning of failed environmental struggle

Much of South Africa turns a blind eye to environmental abuses. **Jacklyn Cock** and **Victor Munnik** tell of an intense environmental struggle against Iscor/Mittal's pollution of Steel Valley. In the process they analyse how the growth and development model has been uncritically, and destructively, adopted by government, trade unions and progressive organisations.

With access to cheap iron ore, coal and the world's cheapest electricity, the Vanderbijlpark steel mill lies at the heart of South Africa's industrial economy. Steelmaking involves large volumes of water and electricity and produces large volumes of solid waste and air and water pollution. It uses vast amounts of coal and iron ore, which contains manganese and traces of heavy metals, including cadmium, lead, zinc and mercury to improve steel quality. Canadian research has established that steel mills emit a toxic brew of more than 100 chemicals, many of them known or suspected to induce cancers.

The Scorgie Report of 2004 found that the Vanderbijlpark mill is a major source of air pollutants, particularly sulphur and carbon dioxide, which have devastating effects on health. It is also a serious water polluter. For years the discharge of up to six megalitres of water a day into unlined effluent dams and along an unlined canal into the Rietspruit River created a pollution plume. This allowed heavy metals and carcinogenic hydrocarbon compounds to contaminate the groundwater



Despite protests Mittal keeps on polluting the environment

which supplied local community boreholes. The polluted canal water was used for recreation and irrigation but carried no warning signs. The result was the destruction of a vibrant and productive community, and the lives of people like Strike Matsepo.

SICKNESS PLAGUES LOCAL LIFE

Strike Matsepo is part of the growing local and global resistance to pollution and corporate abuse. Now aged 74, he worked for Coca

Cola in Vanderbijlpark. During South Africa's democratic transition, he cashed in his pension to buy a farm in Steel Valley, where he has lived with his children and other relatives since 1993. He had heard about pollution in the area, but thought this was a myth to keep black people out.

Matsepo says his farm "used to be a good place" but over the past 15 years several of his animals had birth defects and many have died, including 30 cows. Matsepo himself

is sick and his sister tested with high levels of cadmium in her blood before dying in 2004. Strike's brother, Jacob, had levels of lead in his system which an expert described as "unusual for a person not employed in the metal industry". Strike has had long spells in hospital receiving treatment for kidney failure. "My body is full of pain," he said in an interview in 2005, "But I am trapped here. I can't move and buy a new place with the little money they are offering me for this plot."

Steel Valley supported more than 500 smallholdings, while most of its 3 000 residents were working people who combined subsistence agriculture with wage work at Iscor and in Vereeniging and Vanderbijlpark. One resident lived in the area for five generations, and in a sample of 100 residents, 73 had lived there for more than 10 years. Many kept livestock and grew vegetables. It was a fertile area. "If you planted a feather you'd get a chicken," said one resident.

Hundreds of other people in and around Steel Valley have lost their health and livelihoods. Their animals died, their crops failed, while air and water pollution ravaged their health. Research commissioned by local government in 1998 concluded that "almost the entire area has polluted groundwater or soil, which without remediation, renders the area unsuitable for human habitation". A third of participants in the study complained of serious ailments, including kidney and liver problems and cancer.

Five hundred questionnaires completed by local people showed symptoms of heavy metal poisoning, including kidney disease and various cancers, and tests of 26 people for a 2001 court case showed higher cadmium than the

South African reference levels. Jaap van Rensburg, a resident for 31 years, has constructed a map showing how local people came to suffer from bladder and kidney problems, gallstones, skin disease, heart problems and cancers.

NOT PASSIVE VICTIMS

But the people of Steel Valley were not passive victims. They engaged in many forms of non-violent struggle for justice, including litigation, appeals to government and the Constitutional Court, mass action such as picketing Iscor and participating in consultative processes and forums. This was like "throwing stones at a giant", said one activist.

In 2002 the children of 16 applicants in a compensation claim against Iscor/Mittal founded the Steel Valley Crisis Committee (SVCC), despite an Iscor gagging order. They aimed to mobilise the community and coordinate efforts to compel the company, the courts and the government to stop groundwater, surface water and air pollution and win compensation for victims. Their main strategy was the law, which unfortunately caused a dependence on outside white experts.

In 2000 Iscor bought out 350 smallholdings for R75-million. It paid only for the property and not for the loss of crops, livestock or ill-health. People complained that the prices were too low for the smallholders to re-establish themselves elsewhere. The Steel Valley community was destroyed, as most smallholders and farmworkers moved away.

Iscor escaped liability although in some cases it supplied water to poisoned neighbours, negotiated with them and bought out their farms. Iscor and its owner, Arcelor-Mittal, produced a secret 9 000-word 'master plan' which denies

pollution took place. Eventually, it upgraded the environmental management of production by installing a R280-million water treatment plant in 2006 and by planning to improve air pollution. But there were no plans to compensate pollution victims or rehabilitate the area.

WHY STRUGGLE FAILED

The Steel Valley struggle failed because of the growth paradigm in South Africa which gives great power to Iscor and Mittal. Also weak environmental regulation, the absence of the labour movement and a mass-based environmental movement, the powerlessness of Steel Valley's smallholders and farmworkers, and the hidden character of much pollution contributed to its lack of success.

Government sees pollution of secondary importance compared to Mittal's strategic importance as a benefactor of coal and iron ore and as a supplier to downstream industries such as construction, mining and car production. Since 1994 growth has been seen as development. Yet, Mittal's latest price hike, in March 2008, was the fourth in two months. The government and the mines, in particular, have protested against its 'import parity' pricing policies, which have resulted in price inflation for downstream industry.

The Steel Valley community was never strong and cohesive. It suffered from social, racial and ideological divisions and was poor and scattered. Ill-health and anxieties about the future drained people's energies. The emphasis was on individual self-reliance rather than collective solidarity. Many smallholders were also fearful because they worked for Iscor. Said one, "You don't pick a fight with your bread and butter."



Strike Matsepo on his farm in Steel Valley

GOVERNMENT ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES

In theory, environmental justice is enshrined in the National Environmental Management Act and Section 24 of the Constitution. It says “everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing and to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that prevent pollution and ecological degradation”. In practice, the approach of government according to environmental activist Bobby Peek is one of “negotiated non-compliance”.

Environmental management is fragmented between different government departments. Water quality falls under Water Affairs, air quality under Environmental Affairs and mining under the Minerals and Energy. The environmental inspectors or Green Scorpions fall under Environmental Affairs.

Water Affairs, which grants exemptions and water use permits, failed to support the Steel Valley residents by intervening in the Iscor buy-out or to help residents obtain compensation. It also colluded with Iscor by withholding information about the nature and extent of the pollution.

And it failed to act against the mill over clear breaches of water licence conditions.

The state has recently strengthened pollution control, for example by declaring the Vaal

Triangle an air quality hot spot, passing an Air Quality Act and establishing the Green Scorpions. In October last year, the Green Scorpions shut down Mittal's Vereeniging waste site in response to the dumping of hazardous waste and air and water pollution. The company has until December to remove hazardous waste, address ‘serious pollution’ and submit a rehabilitation plan.

WHY NO UNION SUPPORT?

Neither Solidarity nor the National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa) has been active in the environmental struggle against the mill. SVCC chair Samson Mokoena complains that the unions “are afraid of losing their jobs and also they didn't want to look anti-government”. Many unionists also see environmental concerns as an obstacle to development – the priority is jobs. Solidarity and Numsa have actively opposed retrenchments at the mill, import parity pricing and foreign control of a strategic industry.

The Steel Valley saga underscores the labour movement's wider neglect of the environment. Unions have also failed to join other social movements in struggles against the privatisation of a crucial environmental resource, water.

In late 2007 Numsa did voice concern about Mittal's lack of interest in “eliminating hazards faced by workers on a daily basis in their workplace and in their communities”. This link between the community and work environment

is crucial to mobilising labour in the struggle for environmental justice.

One legacy of apartheid is the absence of a strong mass-based environmental movement in South Africa. Environmentalism under apartheid meant plant and animal conservation, to the neglect of human needs, particularly those of the black majority. The Environmental Justice Networking Forum, which could have generated a coherent movement, is in disarray.

Today there is much grassroots environmental activity such as communal vegetable gardens and protests about the privatisation of water, but the mobilising issues are health and rights. The energy for these struggles comes from the anger at the growing gap between the discourse of rights and the reality of unmet needs. These are tensions experienced by poor, marginalised communities without access to jobs, housing, land, water or sanitation.

The problem is that pollution is often hidden and slow-working. Sociologist Ulrich Beck argues that recognition of pollution is difficult because the risks are everywhere in urban-industrial society, but much pollution is invisible and only specialised scientific knowledge can detect it. These uncertainties about the pollution chain make it possible for industry and regulators to escape responsibility.

Some analysts have criticised the science which dominates medical and legal thinking and which tries to link specific toxins to specific diseases. Phillip Lloyd, a professor of chemical engineering and expert witness in a Steel Valley court case, emphasises that “you cannot always say that, that chemical causes that disease”. Instead, a ‘cocktail’ of toxic substances damages health.

The Steel Valley struggle failed, above all, because government has



After years of legal and public battle, the slag dams remain unrehabilitated and pollute surrounding farms

failed to prioritise environmental issues, which are overshadowed by growth issues. The heart of the problem is the widespread acceptance of the mantra: growth = economic development = job creation = poverty alleviation. The economic debates in the ANC, Cosatu and the South African Communist Party are about different paths to growth. None of them questions the idea of growth as the central goal of development programmes.

But development as growth depends on the availability of natural resources. As Wolfgang Sachs says: "The emphasis on growth ignores the limits to which nature can act as a source (of raw materials) and a sink (for waste products)."

The state protects corporate polluters in the name of growth and development. This applies also to Eskom, a major externaliser of environmental costs.

The latest *groundwork* report points out that Eskom's coal-fired power stations are South Africa's top emitters of carbon dioxide (responsible for global warming) and sulphur dioxide (which produces acid rain). Eskom resists the installation of scrubbers for sulphur dioxide for cost reasons. The environmental impact assessment for Medupi, the coal-fired power station under construction in Limpopo, predicts serious effects on people's health but Eskom builds without scrubbers anyway. Eskom CEO Jacob Maroga says Eskom will save R6-billion on Medupi by not installing a

sulphur dioxide scrubber, adding that the area is under-polluted compared with Witbank.

The growth discourse is increasingly under attack from an ecological perspective. Elmar Altwater emphasises that the "fuel driving capitalist dynamics is running out" and the transition to renewable energy requires "a solar revolution" and a radical transformation of production and consumption patterns. Sachs argues that constraints on resources means we can no longer talk of development as growth. For everyone to live as middle-class people as in the North would require the resources of five or six planets.

CONCLUSION

In Steel Valley, profitable steel production, cheap electricity and the wasteful use of water came at a huge cost to the neighbouring community. The minor role of organised labour in that environmental struggle reflects its failure to acknowledge the environmental crisis and the resource constraints on development and growth.

At the same time, the environmental movement has not clearly explained environmental issues to the labour movement. It must address labour's concerns about energy and jobs more concretely, and the energy crisis shows how this can be done. It is agreed that world oil and gas production are about to peak and that energy prices will rise dramatically. This could mean that

"poor people will be unable to cook their food, while the better-off will still be using their air-conditioning and running big cars," says Richard Douthwaite.

Clearly, renewable energy like sun and wind is a cleaner alternative to fossil fuels and points to how the ecological and social crisis are linked. Social justice demands that the mass of our people should have clean, safe energy. Environmental justice demands that this should take the form of renewable energy, with its potential for job creation and increased local participation in decentralised companies.

Employment in the electricity supply industry has declined by more than 50% since the 1980s. An independent study by Richard Worthington concludes that "if just 15% of South Africa's electricity came from renewable resources, 36 400 new jobs would be created in the electricity supply industry without taking any jobs away from coal-based electricity. Over 1,2-million direct and indirect jobs would be generated if a portion of South Africa's total energy needs, including fuels were sourced with renewable energy technologies by 2020."

The Steel Valley struggle explodes any idea of an easy alliance between 'red' and 'green', between labour and environmental activists. But their cooperation is essential if we are to overcome social and environmental injustice. John Saul writes that this is "the absolutely central challenge that confronts humankind in the new century". LE

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