

**Développement durable ou justice environnementale:
questions posées par le combat de Steel Valley au
mouvement syndical sud-africain**

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Résumé

Selon l'argument central de cet article, tout débat sur les différents modèles de développement doit avoir comme point de départ la crise environnementale actuelle. Cette crise causée par la pollution croissante et la consommation excessive de ressources par les élites mondiales a des impacts négatifs sur la santé et la subsistance des mal nantis. Le concept de développement durable a été fortement critiqué à cause du côté flou qui lui a permis d'être incorporé aux approches néolibérales. La justice environnementale offre une alternative radicale par son discours, en doutant de la capacité du marché de produire un développement durable social ou environnemental. Pour illustrer ce point de vue, l'article présente une étude de cas du combat pour la justice environnementale de Steel Valley en Afrique du Sud. D'abord nous présentons le profil du président de la société Mittal Steel et ensuite celui d'un individu parmi des centaines ayant perdu santé et gagne-pain à cause de la pollution causée par cette société à la nappe phréatique autour de Vanderbijlpark. L'auteur conclue que le rôle minimal joué par le mouvement syndical dans cette lutte reflète l'échec du syndicalisme à reconnaître les implications de la crise environnementale ainsi que l'impact du manque de ressources sur la croissance et le développement.

Sustainable Development or Environmental Justice: Questions for the South African Labour Movement from the Steel Valley Struggle

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Abstract

The central argument of the article is that debates on different models of development have to be grounded in the current environmental crisis. This crisis involves increasing pollution and excessive resource consumption on the part of global elites with extremely negative impacts on the health and livelihoods of the poor. The concept of sustainable development has been extensively criticized for the vagueness which has enabled it to be incorporated into neoliberal approaches. The discourse of environmental justice provides a radical alternative questioning the market's ability to bring about social or environmental sustainability. The argument is illustrated with reference to a case study of the Steel Valley struggle for environmental justice in South Africa. This is introduced by a profile of both the chairman of the company which controls ten per cent of global steel production and one of hundreds who has lost his health and livelihood from the pollution of the groundwater around Vanderbjlpark by Mittal Steel. The article concludes that the minimal role of organized labour in this struggle reflects the labour movement's failure to acknowledge the implications of the environmental crisis generally and specifically the resource constraints on development and growth.

Introduction

The article argues that debates within the South African labour movement on different models of development should be grounded in the current environmental crisis. This crisis involves both increasing pollution and excessive resource consumption on the part of global elites, with extremely negative impacts on the health and livelihoods of the poor. The argument is illustrated with reference to a case study of the Steel Valley struggle.² It is suggested that the minimal role of organized labour in this struggle reflects a denial of resource constraints on economic develop-

ment.

The first of two key actors in this struggle is Lakshmi Mittal, estimated to be the third richest man in the world. He recently bought a house in London for over ZAR840 million (South African Rand) in what was reputed to be the most expensive residential property deal recorded in England. The house has a jewel encrusted bathroom and he also spent R30 million on his daughter's wedding last year. He is chairman of the company Arcelor/Mittal which controls around 10 per cent of global steel production. It has over 300,000 employees and operates in 27 different countries including South Africa. One of his most profitable steel mills is situated an hour away from Johannesburg in Vanderbjlpark in an area known as Steel Valley.

The second key actor is Strike Matsepo, one of the small farmers who has lost his health and livelihood from the pollution of the groundwater around Vanderbjlpark by the steel mill which was owned by Iscor until 2004. Seventy-four at the time of the interview Strike worked for Coca Cola at Vanderbjlpark. With the political transition, "at the time of Mandela when people could buy where they liked" he cashed his pension to buy a farm at Steel Valley, and has lived there since 1993. He had heard that there were pollution problems in the area but he thought that they were a myth to keep black people out of the area. He brought his children, stepchildren, sister, brother and grandchildren to live with him in his new home and states proudly, "a big sack of mealie meal was finished in two weeks." He says "it used to be a good place" but in the last 15 years several of his animals were born with birth defects and many have died. "In all 30 cows have died, as well as 9 calves, 5 sheep, 6 goats, 3 tortoises, 1 pig, 7 dogs, 30 chickens and 4 cats." Mr. Matsepo himself is sick and his sister who lived with him passed away in 2004. She had high levels of cadmium in her blood and scientific evidence has confirmed the presence of cadmium and other dangerous and carcinogenic substances in the groundwater. Strike himself has spent several long periods in the hospital being treated for kidney failure associated with pollutants known to be in the groundwater. Other family members are also sick and report that they have to stay inside their house because the dust and air pollution is so bad. Having recently suffered a stroke and then facing the threat of the sheriff of the court who wished to impound all of his possessions to pay legal costs from a failed court challenge, Strike

stated, “my body is full of pain” 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.”³

Like Strike, hundreds of people in the area of Steel Valley have lost their health and livelihoods. It used to be a vibrant, productive community of over 500 smallholdings. Many kept livestock and grew a variety of vegetables for their own consumption, including pumpkins, tomatoes, spinach, onions, cabbages, beans and maize. Some sold vegetables in nearby towns such as Sebokeng and Vereeniging, earning as much as R800 a week, but slowly their animals died, their crops failed and the air and water pollution had devastating impacts on their health.

Symptoms of illness, as revealed in 500 questionnaires obtained from local people, pointed clearly to heavy metal poisoning, kidney disease and various types of cancer. Furthermore, tests of 26 people for a 2001 court case showed higher cadmium than the South African reference levels. Jaap van Rensburg, a resident of the area for 31 years, has constructed a map showing how many local people came to suffer from bladder and kidney problems, gallstones, skin disease, heart problems and cancers.⁴

The Cock family lived for 14 years on a smallholding on the edge of the unlined canal from the steel mill carrying processed water to the Vaal River.⁵ “We were a farming family and had goats, sheep, ducks, horses, geese, but they all died. Many animals were born malformed. We left when the whole family got sick, skin growths, emphysema and cancer. My one daughter has been diagnosed with three types of cancer ... the doctors relate these cancers to the canal water. As a youngster she played in it and we drank it. The ISCOR water has made all my children and my grandchildren sick,” Mrs. Joey Cock said.⁶

In 2002, the Cock and Matsepe families came together with others to form the Steel Valley Crisis Committee. Their aim was to mobilize the community and coordinate efforts to engage the company which then owned the steel mill (ISCOR), to appeal to the courts and the government to stop the pollution of the groundwater, surface water and air, and to obtain compensation for its victims. Their strategies have included appeals to ISCOR, which employed many of the residents. Appeals were also made to the Department of Water Affairs which carries responsibility for protecting water users against water pollution under both the apartheid and post-apartheid governments. Residents and their

organizations have participated in a variety of forums and engaged with experts and local government. Three private legal actions have been initiated. The Constitutional Court has been approached and faxes sent to both President Nelson Mandela and his successor, Thabo Mbeki. Residents have publicized their situation in the print media and in television, and have picketed the steel mill. The labour movement was conspicuous in its absence from these actions.

Today the Steel Valley Crisis Committee is part of a larger structure called the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA) which was formed in 2004 and brings together 15 different organizations. It is attempting to widen the struggle against the pollution and build on the tradition of militancy in the Vaal Triangle during the anti-apartheid struggle which culminated in the 1984 Vaal uprising. Organized labour is a presence in the area. NUMSA (the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) is the biggest of the three trade unions who organize the 5,500 people who work at the steel mill, along with Solidarity and the United Association of South Africa (UASA), but none have been affiliated to VEJA. NUMSA was in the forefront of the struggle to win rights for ISCOR's black workers and played an important role in the struggle against apartheid in the Vaal Triangle, but they have been absent from the Steel Valley struggle, (although two representatives attended the constitutive meeting in Louisrus in 2005) despite the fact that workers are the first victims of the steel mill's pollution in that they are exposed to dangerous working conditions. A number of ISCOR workers now linked as individuals to VEJA reported serious health problems such as high blood pressure, kidney problems and most informants related their health problems to what they termed 'poisoned water.' The largest and most influential trade union federation in South Africa with 1.8 million members, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is not among the national organizations supporting VEJA.

The social base of VEJA is comprised of black, working class, poor, and largely unemployed people. Their meetings are mainly attended by "poor people who walk to meetings and don't have the money for cell phones or taxis. We communicate through loud hailers or pamphlets which small children distribute."⁷ VEJA is committed to negotiate and fight for environmental justice in the Vaal. It has the capacity to reach up into the

decision making levels of the local state and down into grassroots communities as well as to forge linkages with other environmental justice groups at national, regional, continental and global levels. This geographical, social and political reach has considerable potential. But an alternative network of power with the strength and determination to defeat the globalized steel empire of Mittal needs to incorporate the labour movement.

Absence of Labour

The absence of strong union support for environmental campaigns in the Vaal Triangle stands in sharp contrast with the role that the labour movement played in the struggle against apartheid. There are a number of reasons for the absence of labour from the Steel Valley Struggle. According to Samson Mokoena, who was chairperson of the Steel Valley Crisis Committee, “there is a perception that environmental activists want to shut down ISCOR which is not true. When ISCOR applied for a gag order against Steel Valley residents, there was talk about how the community wanted to shut down the company. Given what the impact of ISCOR’s closure would be on the economy of the Vaal triangle such statements must surely make NUMSA not want to participate fully in this thing. There is also a perception that the environmental groups are against government and the ANC which is not true.”⁸

The absence of labour from the Steel Valley struggle is indicative of a wider neglect of environmental issues. Trade unions have failed to unite with social movements in struggles against the privatization of a crucial environmental resource, water (Harvey, 2007). According to Harvey, neither the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) nor the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) have been active in struggles against the installation of prepaid water meters in Phiri, Soweto, which has had devastating impacts on poor households: “COSATU itself was in no way involved in these struggles” (Harvey, 2007: 54). There is no mention of environmental issues in the COSATU Central Executive Committee statement of March 2007 which emerged from a meeting attended by the National Office Bearers and delegates from all 21 affiliated unions. This silence also applies to the COSATU Discussion Document for the Fourth COSATU Central Committee of September, 2007. Similarly the documents and discussion at CO-

SATU's ninth congress in 2006 failed to engage with environmental issues, and there was no mention of the environmental crisis in the political discussion document prepared for the congress. The 2006 COSATU shop steward's training manuals contain excellent material on a range of social justice issues but nothing on environmental justice and very little on health and safety (COSATU, 2006). Trade unionist, researcher and ex-NUMSA organizer Dingwa Sikwebyu argues that, "from the 1980s on, a view seemed to have developed within the labour movement that health and safety issues were not a priority in building organization" (Cock and Munnik, 2006: 34). The focus was on jobs, both by union organizers and workers. The retrenchment of some 20,000 workers at the Vanderbjlpark mill since 1994 clearly reinforces fears of job losses. The heart of the problem is the widespread acceptance of the mantra: growth equals economic development equals job creation equals poverty alleviation. The debates on economic strategy within the ANC, COSATU and the South African Communist Party are about different paths to growth. There is no questioning of the notion of growth as the central goal of development programs. Dinga Sikwebu recommends that greater trade union involvement in the environmental movement will require building the capacity of shop stewards to deal with health and safety issues inside the workplace as well as building a better understanding among environmental activists of how unions operate.⁹

Absence of a Mass-based Movement

The situation is complicated by the fact that there is also an absence of a strong mass-based environmental movement in South Africa. This is a legacy of an authoritarian tradition during the apartheid era which focused on the conservation of threatened plants, animals and wilderness areas to the neglect of social issues and human needs, particularly those of the oppressed black majority. The Environmental Justice Networking Forum was potentially the carrier of a coherent, comprehensive movement in South Africa but is currently in disarray (Cock, 2006). Today there is much grassroots environmental activity - such as communal vegetable gardens and protests about the privatization of water - but the mobilizing issues are health and rights. The anger and energy of these struggles generally comes from the growing gap between the discourse of rights and the reality of unmet needs;

the tensions experienced by poor, marginalized communities without access to jobs, housing, land, water and sanitation. Even struggles over access to natural resources such as water or the return of land to people dispossessed in the process of creating national parks are not framed as environmental struggles. Munnik and Wilson speak of “a general South African anti-environmentalism” (Munnik and Wilson, 2006: 72).

State’s Commitment: Weak in Practice

Furthermore the commitment of the post-apartheid state to environmental issues is weak in both theory and practice. Some state policies are disastrous in environmental terms. For example, the government’s decision to provide massive amounts of cheap electricity to Alcan (owned by Rio Tinto) to set up a R20 billion aluminium smelter at Coega will have major pollution impacts and, according to Richard Fuggle (Professor of Environmental Science at the University of Cape Town), push South Africa into becoming the top per capital emitter of carbon dioxide emissions in the world (Peta, 2006). The Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) continues to perpetuate the idea of poverty eradication as a trickle down from growth under the new language of leverage of the second (informal) economy by the first (formal) economy.

A position that is often articulated by government representatives is that environmental considerations form blocks to development. Recently the Minister of Housing “sparked outrage in the environmental world when she told the construction industry that housing delivery would no longer be ‘held hostage by butterfly eggs’” (Mcleod, 2006). Environmental issues are also seen as blocking job creation. Thabo Mbeki recently attacked the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) regulations saying that they were causing development delays that mean “a quite considerable slowing down of economic activity” (Mcleod, 2006). Such statements reflect a failure to appreciate the fragility of the natural resource base on which all economic activity depends.

The core of the problem is the weak presence of environmentalism in the dominant policy of sustainable development. Development is understood as growth which depends on the availability of natural resources, but, as Sachs writes: “The open-ended nature of growth cannot be taken for granted any longer. From the local up to the global level, it has become evident in

many instances that resources (water, timber, oil, minerals etc.), sites (land for mines, settlements, infrastructure etc) and sinks (soils, oceans and atmosphere) for the natural inputs of economic growth are becoming scarce” (Sachs, 1999: 166). These biophysical limits to growth are one component of the current environmental crisis.

The Current Environmental Crisis

The environmental crisis is most dramatically evident in global warming, with its devastating pattern of chaotic weather and habitat change. Monbiot (2006) has warned of ‘ecological catastrophe’ unless carbon emissions are reduced by ninety percent. It is estimated that one third of the planet will be desert by the year 2100 (McCarthy, 2006). Those most affected are the marginalized peoples of the South, particularly in Africa where agricultural communities already struggle to cope with changing rainfall patterns and there has been an increasing spread of diseases such as cholera and malaria (Joubert, 2006). Those most responsible for increasing carbon emissions are the consumers of the North and the elites of the South. South Africa is one of the worst contributors to global warming and policy proposals to build 15 more coal fired power stations to meet our electricity needs ignore this reality.

However, global warming is only one component of a much deeper and more extensive ecological crisis: “It is not about any given ecosystem damage such as global warming, species loss, resource depletion, or the widespread intoxication by new chemicals... It is about the fact that these kinds of things are all happening together” (Kovel, 2003: 20). The onset of ecological collapse signalled by global warming and the failure of all twentieth century development paradigms means we have to re-think the conventional development paradigms. It will be argued below that the current ecological crisis cannot be solved within the existing economic system.

The Failure of Development

Sachs points out that “[d]evelopment has become a shapeless, amoeba-like word. It cannot express anything because its outlines are blurred. But it remains ineradicable because it appears so benign” (Sachs, 1999: 7). He argues that development has failed. He dates the ‘development era’ to Truman’s inaugura-

tion speech in 1949 and points out that despite 50 years of development “the state of affairs is dismal” (Sachs, 1999: 73). “The best one can say is that development has created a global middle class of individuals with cars, bank accounts and career aspirations. It is made up of the majority in the North and small elites in the South and its size roughly equals that 8% of the world population that owns a car” (Sachs, 1999: 30). In his analysis growth was expected to abolish poverty, but “instead it led to social polarization” (Sachs, 1990: 32).

In similar terms, Vandana Shiva maintains that “the resource intensive demands of current development have ecological destruction and economic deprivation built into them” (2002: 20). Development has been associated with ‘progress’ which is a cover for the “transfer of resources and wealth from poor people and poor countries to rich people and rich countries” (Shiva, 2002: 20).

The environmental crisis is linked to increasing social injustice and exclusion in two ways: firstly, in that the poor and the powerless are most negatively affected by pollution, and secondly in that the richest 20% of the world population consume 80% of its resources. “It is that minority who eat 45% of all the meat and fish, consume 68% of all electricity, 84% of all paper, own 87% of all motor cars” (Sachs et al, 2002: 19). “This 20% also lay claim to 85% of the world’s timber, 75% of its metals and 70% of its energy”. Their lifestyle cannot serve as the standard of justice or the goal of development (Sachs, 1999: 171). So Sachs argues that what we have to talk about “the alleviation of wealth rather than the alleviation of poverty; because of resource constraints we can no longer talk of development as economic growth. To live as middle class people in the North do we would need more resources than exist on the entire planet, in fact, “five or six planets would be needed to serve as ‘sources’ for the inputs and ‘sinks’ for the waste of economic progress” (Sachs, 1999: 74).

This global pattern of deprivation and over-consumption is clear in post-apartheid South Africa, now one of the most unequal societies in the world. Roughly a third of all households live below the estimated poverty datum line of R322 a month. At the same time the chief executives (mainly white men) of South Africa’s 50 largest and most influential companies are each being paid on average more than R15 million a year. They make more

than 700 times the minimum wage (Crotty and Bonorchis, 2006). They are part of what Saul calls a “dominant, transnational capitalist class” which is surrounded by “vast outer circles of less privileged people” (Saul, 2006: 22).

The notion of sustainable development was supposed to address these two crises - the environmental crisis (whereby we have reached the limits of nature as a source and as a sink) and the crisis of justice (increasing social exclusion and inequality).

Environmental Issues and Sustainable Development

The sustainable development paradigm, which is at the centre of post-apartheid state policy, has been extensively criticized for the vagueness which has enabled it to be incorporated into neoliberal approaches (Bond, 2002). It can mean that environmentalism is voided of political content and “becomes a public concern with environmental deterioration - a concern, not necessarily the object of a social struggle, a cause without conflict” (Acsehrad, 2002: 18).

Sustainable development is the paradigm which informed the Johannesburg Declaration, which came out of the Trade Union African Conference on Labour and the Environment held in Johannesburg in July 2006. Sixty-two union members representing twenty-four national centers in nineteen countries agreed that the linkages between labour and environment must be strengthened. It was agreed to:

Strengthen our understanding of the links between the environmental, labour and poverty, [to] strengthen union training for leaders and workers, as a political strategy for building common labour-sustainable development actions, [to] make water a priority for union organizing in the regions, promote the education of communities and raise awareness about the serious consequences of managing resources as commodities, [and to] promote sustainable production and consumption patterns through cleaner production centers and the dissemination and transfer of technology (UNEP, July 2006).

These are important resolutions but little has been achieved on the ground in South Africa. The notion of sustainable development is part of the problem that makes concrete action difficult.

The notion of sustainability formulated in 1987 by the

World Commission for Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) was claimed to link environment and development. The Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as: “Development that meets the needs of the present... without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987: 8). This definition “puts the spotlight on ‘needs’ and ‘generations’, terms that are socially neutral, comprising both rich and poor, powerful and powerless classes” (Sachs, 1999: 160). In other words it is vacuous, empty of any class content, in the sense of ignoring the over-consumption and wastefulness of the dominant classes. It does not demand any reduction in the use of resources and production of pollutants by the rich minority.

Brundtland argues for further economic growth but Sachs argues that economic growth is the problem not the solution: “Up until the present day, development politicians have viewed ‘poverty’ as the problem and ‘growth’ as the solution” (Sachs, 1999: 11). Growth benefits the rich and damages the environment. Justice has to start with changing the rich - not with changing the poor, as the development discourse has implied for the last 30 years. The solution is redistribution, or as Sachs expresses it, ‘the alleviation of wealth’, rather than ‘the alleviation of poverty’. The report is evasive “about the effects of power and over consumption. This fuzziness certainly facilitated the acceptance of ‘sustainable development’ in circles of privilege and power, but obscured the point that there will be no sustainability without restraint on wealth” (Sachs, 1999: 160). In other words, the rich are the problem. “In designing strategies for the poor, developmentalists work towards lifting the bottom, rather than lowering the top... the wealthy and their way of producing and consuming remains entirely outside the spotlight, as always in the development discourse where the burden of change is solely heaped upon the poor... justice is about changing the rich and not about changing the poor” (Sachs, 1999: 17).

Not only is there this failure to confront the over-consumption and wastefulness of the rich, and a very weak inclusion of environmental issues in the concept of sustainable development, but it says nothing about biodiversity. We need this emphasis because as a Worldwatch report states, “many recent converts to the creed of sustainable development seem to think that a world consisting primarily of cities, cornfields and eucalyptus

plantations would be both sustainable and pleasant, when it would be neither” (Worldwatch, 2000: 12). It is particularly important for us at this moment when we are facing the prospect of a greatly diminished world for the next generation. Scientists estimate that more than one million species will be lost by 2050. And it is believed that much of that loss - more than one in 10 of all plants and animals - is already irreversible because of global warming. Much of the loss of biodiversity is because of the behaviour of the rich and the powerful; it is due to loss of habitat to corporations and developers concerned only with profit.

The discourse of sustainable development is, of course, an advance on earlier protectionist models of environmentalism in that it is concerned with ‘human needs’ but it is generally marked by technocratic, pragmatic and reformist attempts to bring environmental externalities into the marketplace through ecological modernization. The discourse of environmental justice provides a radical alternative, questioning the market’s ability to bring about social or environmental sustainability. As the leading US anti-toxics activist Louis Gibbs has argued, “The growing environmental justice movement asks the question, ‘what is morally correct?’ instead of ‘what is legally, scientifically and pragmatically possible?’” (Gibbs, cited in Levine, 1982: 34).

Environmental Justice: a Reconfiguration of the Discourse on Environmentalism

From the perspective of the sustainable development paradigm, the emphasis is on needs and the problem is poverty, from the perspective of environmental justice, the emphasis is on rights and the problem is wealth. The discourse of environmental justice has more potential to address the current global crisis of nature (increasing environmental degradation) as well as the crisis of justice (increasing social inequality and exclusion).

During the apartheid regime environmentalism operated effectively as a conservation strategy that neglected social needs (See Kahn, 1991; 1994; 1998; Mittelman, 1998). The notion of environmental justice represents an important shift away from this traditional authoritarian concept of environmentalism which was mainly concerned with the conservation of threatened plants, animals and wilderness areas, to include urban, health, labour and development issues (Cock, 2006). It is linked to social justice as “an all-encompassing notion that affirms the use value of life, all

forms of life, against the interests of wealth, power and technology” (Castells, 1997; 132).

In our context the concept of environmental justice potentially provides an organizing tool for mobilizing multiple, diverse communities into political action on a variety of rights and claims. Some of these rights have a constitutional grounding as the Bill of Rights Section 24 states that “everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well being” (Republic of South Africa. 1996). The core of the notion of environmental justice as a powerful mobilizing force lies in this notion of rights - rights of access to natural resources and to decision making. The notion of rights is used to legitimize demands and claims. The counter-hegemonic potential lies in the challenge to power relations that this notion of rights implies.

While the concept of environmental justice emerged from the US there are important differences in the South African adaptation of the concept. Here the focus is on total change driven by majority rather than minority interests and includes class issues, whereas in the US it tends to prioritize environmental racism. Also, the movement in South Africa frequently addresses the root causes of environmental degradation - processes such as privatization and deregulation - whereas the US focus is on symptoms. In the South African context, environmental justice means social transformation directed to meeting basic human needs and rights. It could be a central idea in a grassroots movement which is fueled by the growing contradiction between the discourse of rights and the experience of unmet needs, but such a movement has to be driven by labour.

The fractured relationship between environmental and labour activists exists in other societies as well. For example, in the US, Peggy Shepherd, the executive director of West Harlem Environmental Action stresses that the strength of the environmental justice movement was its localism and its future depended on establishing closer links with labour. But she said this was often difficult because, “trade unionists prioritize jobs. They focus on national rather than local issues. Unions often remove leaders from their communities. They get sent to fancy hotels with swimming pools.”¹⁰

The problem is that the labour movement in South Africa does not acknowledge that we are living through the early stages of ecological collapse. This is particular evident in the silence

about environmental issues in the documents and resolutions presented at COSATU'S ninth National Congress. While there is a strong resolve to "re-direct the National Democratic Revolution towards socialism" there is no acknowledgement that a focus on the ecological crisis could be a way to do this, a route to "mobilize society and all progressive forces against the current macro-economic framework" by showing how capitalism's pressure to expand is not ecologically sustainable (COSATU, 2007: 38).

Socialism or Death

Capitalism is not ecologically sustainable. As Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez proclaimed on January 27, 2006 at a rally of the Latin American section of the Sixth World Social Forum in Caracas, it is a case of "[s]ocialism or death... capitalism has destroyed the ecological equilibrium of the earth... we do not have much time left" (Green Left, 2006).

The labour movement in South Africa does not appear to acknowledge this. Capitalism is the force driving this global ecological crisis through its pressure to expand and compete, described by Kovel as a 'suicidal regime.' Capitalism's unrelenting pressure to expand has ignored reports dating back to 1972 when the Club of Rome pointed to the ecological limits on such expansion.

The pressure is to expand and compete in the drive for profit. The corporate neglect of human needs in the drive for profit was most dramatically illustrated in the case of the Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal India where cost cutting in 1984 resulted in a gas leak which causing the deaths of 8,000 people in the first three days alone and injuries to some 120,000 (Hynes, 1989:13). Closer to home, the South Durban basin has the worst rate of asthma in the world as a result of air pollution by the petro-chemical industries situated there (Personal communication by author with South Durban environmental activist, Desmond D'SA July, 2006). Other evidence of corporate neglect leading to deterioration of human health exists in Vanderbijlpark where Mittal/Iskor's pollution of the groundwater has had devastating impacts on the poor and the powerless.

Kovel argues that confronting the reality of ecological collapse involves more far reaching measures than renewable energy, unleaded petrol or recycled newspapers. In the same vein

that Luxemburg posed the choice for humanity as ‘socialism or barbarism,’ our choice now “is either capital or our future” (Kovel, 2002: 149). Capital “is not what most people take it to be. It is not a rational system of markets in which freely constituted individuals create wealth in healthy competition. It is, rather, a spectral apparatus that integrates earlier modes of domination, especially that by gender, and generates a gigantic force field of profit-seeking that polarizes all human activity and sucks it into itself” (Kovel, 2002: 149).

Kovel’s solution is a total revolution he calls ‘ecosocialist’ which he claims is the only way to ensure not just survival but a better life for all. If we value a future, “capitalism must be brought down and replaced with an ecologically worthy society” (Kovel, 2002: 149). To overcome capital “there must be basic changes in ownership of productive resources so that, ultimately, the earth is no longer privately owned, and second, our productive powers, the core of human nature, have to be liberated, so that people self-determine their productive power” (Kovel, 2002: 150). Ecosocialism is ‘more than socialism’ with “its association of economic failure, political repression and environmental blight” (Kovel, 2002: 199). Nature will cease to be simply a source (a store of resources) or a sink (a repository of waste). It will “restore the intrinsic value of nature” to a free association of producers (Kovel, 2002, 199).

This fits in with Marx’s own vision. Recently Paul Burkett has argued that Marx has been misunderstood; he has been unfairly accused of having no concern with the abuse of nature and of viewing natural resources as unlimited: “In reality, Marx was deeply concerned with capitalism’s tendency toward “sapping the original sources of all wealth, the soil and the labourer. And he repeatedly emphasized the imperative for post-capitalist society to manage its use of natural conditions responsibly” (Burkett, 2005: 46). Marx goes so far as to define communism as “the unity of being of man with nature” (Burkett, 2005: 47). Furthermore, he valued nature for intrinsic rather than instrumental reasons as a source of “aesthetic, scientific and moral value.” Engels lamented “the present poisoning of the air, water and land.” Both men had “a deep concern with natural resource management and, more fundamentally, with the de-alienation of nature and the producers, under communism” (Burkett, 2005: 56).

However, Marx argued for economic growth while Kovel

argues for the ideal of sufficiency to replace growth. “Sufficiency makes more sense, building a world where nobody is hungry or cold or lacks health care or succor in old age... Sufficiency is a better term than the ecological buzzword, sustainability, as the latter leaves ambiguous the question of whether what is to be sustained is the existing system or not” (Kovel, 2002: 208).

Conclusion

The minimal role of organized labour in the Steel Valley struggle reflects the labour movement’s failure to acknowledge the implications of the environmental crisis generally and specifically the resource constraints on development and growth.

At the same time, the environmental movement has not clearly articulated environmental issues for the labour movement. A central challenge for the environmental movement is to address labour concerns about energy and jobs more directly and concretely. The energy crisis illustrates how this could be done. It is generally agreed that the peaks in world oil and gas production are about to be reached and 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” (Douthwaite, 2005: 2). Clearly, renewable energy is a cleaner alternative to fossil fuels and points to how the ecological and social crises are linked. Social justice demands that people should be given access to clean, safe energy. Environmental justice demands that this should take the form of renewable energy with its potential to create employment and increased local participation in decentralised enterprises. Employment in the electricity supply industry in South Africa has declined by more than 50 per cent since the 1980s. An independent study concluded 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” (Worthington, 2004: 3).

The main reason for the current denial of the environmental crisis is because of the prevailing understanding of development. Development is interpreted to mean economic growth. This approach is problematic in that it neglects both distributional

and environmental impacts - how growth has benefited the rich, and in that sense contributes to increasing social inequality as well as environmental degradation. Since 1994, unemployment in South Africa has grown and the gap between rich and poor has widened.

At the local and global level, in the past few years, we have seen how economic growth has failed to reduce poverty. The past decades have seen significant growth, but little development in the sense of poverty reduction. Development must be reinterpreted to mean redistribution rather than growth. Dr Mkandawire, the head of UNRISD, stated in his keynote address at the 'Social Science in Africa' conference in 2006 (Mkandawire and Mama, 2006) that we have to pay much more attention to "distributional issues." This implies a revitalization of the concept of sustainable development; to anchor it in a redistribution - a redistribution of resources; from rich to poor, as well as a redistribution of power - from government and corporations to communities and citizens.

This is an urgent task: "The only hope for a radical redistribution towards the future is a radical redistribution away from the rich in the present. If greater equality in the present is one of the traditional concerns of red politics, greater equality between generations is an essential characteristic of the new green politics. But not all reds are yet green; nor do all greens look as if they will become reds. The future of sustainable human development depends on a more thorough mixing of the colours" (Sutcliffe, 1995: 338).

While the trajectory of the Steel Valley Crisis Committee explodes any notion of an easy alliance between 'red' and 'green,' between labour and environmental activists in South Africa, their cooperation is essential if we are to overcome social and environmental injustice in the world. As John Saul writes, this is "the absolutely central challenge that confronts humankind in the new century" (Saul, 2006: 6).

Endnotes

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2. This paper draws on material from research conducted with my friend and colleague Victor Munnik which we wrote up as a Centre for Civil Society research report: "Throwing Stones at a Giant" in 2006, which is available at <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs>.

3. Interview by the author with Strike Matsepo, 22 June 2005.
4. Interview with the author and Victor Munnik, 4 February 2007.
5. This family is not related to the author.
6. Interview by the author with Mrs. Joey Cock, 2 December 2004.
7. Interview by the author with the chair of the Vaal Working Class Crisis Committee, Phineas Malapela, 8 February 2005.
8. Interview by the author with Samson Mokoena, chairperson of the Steel Valley Crisis Committee, 22 June 2005.
9. Interview by the author, Johannesburg, 21 September 2005.
10. Interview with the author, New York, 7 June 2006.

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