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Abstract

The paper analyses the impact of free market corporate logic on nature and society through focusing on ArcelorMittal, the world’s largest steel producer. The rapid expansion of this company from the global south was achieved through strategic acquisitions of privatized state steel companies. This growth is characterized by processes which seriously altered nature in ways which proved detrimental to society. This impact is considered through field research in a South African community living in proximity to the steel mill in the Vaal Triangle. The paper evaluates both local and global mobilizations for nature, concluding that a movement orientated globalization from below appears as the only pathway to challenge the logic of global corporations.

Keywords: capital accumulation, corporate power, nature, globalizations, labour internationalisms
STEEL, NATURE & SOCIETY

Introduction

This paper builds on the assertion that ‘we must fight for a new relation of humankind to nature’ (Panitch & Leys 2007, p. xiii). As Hardt and Negri write, the frightening reality ‘is not that humans are changing nature but that nature is ceasing to be common… it is becoming private property and exclusively controlled by its new owners’ (2004, p. 72). Increasingly, these owners are global corporations asserting new power geometry over nation states, which are becoming ever more unaccountable to nature and society thereby allowing these forces to operate without regard for their environmental impacts. This is illustrated though field research involving interviews and a survey of five hundred residents probing the impacts of the world’s largest steel producer, ArcelorMittal, on a local community in South Africa.

This case highlights how the commodification of nature is an outcome of the logic of capital accumulation shaped by the free market. As the destruction of the Steel Valley environment in South Africa reveals, this process has dramatic consequences for society. While we capture this relationship between accumulation, nature and society through empirical research in this specific place, evidence reveals that this is not isolated. The corporation’s production sites across the globe impact in this way:

Table 1 Arcelor Mittal Environmental Impacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ArcelorMittal Subsidiary</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Environmental and Social Impacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal Ireland</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Unlicensed hazardous waste dump; €30 million clean-up bill unfulfilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal Caribbean</td>
<td>Trinidad &amp; Tobago</td>
<td>High levels of pollution and related health problems; ongoing safety concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal Cleveland Steel Works</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>High levels of pollution and related health problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal Galati (formerly Sidex)</td>
<td>Rumania</td>
<td>Air &amp; water pollution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal Kryvyi Rih (formerly KryvorizhStal JSC)</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>Alleged switching off of pollution control equipment at night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal Esch-Belval</td>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>Air pollution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal Ostrava (formerly Nova Hut)</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>High level of air pollution; intensity of energy use; labour redundancies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal in South Africa</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Air pollution; contaminated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanderbijlpark</td>
<td>groundwater</td>
<td></td>
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<td>----------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal Temirtau (formerly Mittal Steel Temirtau, Ispat Karmet and Karaganda Metallurgical Plant)</td>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>Air pollution; ongoing safety concerns –injuries and deaths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ArcelorMittal Zenica (formerly Zeljezara Zenica)</td>
<td>Bosnia Herzegovina</td>
<td>Air pollution; ongoing safety concerns –injuries and deaths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In relating this instance of capital accumulation to nature (the life systems of atmosphere and groundwater) and consequent social impacts, our empirical exposition seeks to offer a compelling criticism of nature’s commodification at this point in history. Our approach is to ground such a critique in the corporation’s accumulation logic, which transformed the organization from a minor operator in West Bengal in the 1950s to the world’s largest steel producer within three decades. This rapid expansion forged economic power and political influence within the nation states the company chose to invest in, thereby minimizing environmental accountability (Leys 2001, p. 17). This paper contends that a new kind of movement needs to be envisioned if society is to resist the environmental degradation which flows from this power imbalance. We relate such a movement to the emergence of a new labour internationalism, which contrasts markedly with the bureaucratic, lobbying orientation of established internationalisms.

This question of possible resistance to global corporate power is grounded in the story of steel. First, we analyze the remarkable growth of ArcelorMittal showing precisely how the organization gained status as the world’s largest steel corporation forging power over place, which produced both steel and environmental wastelands across surrounding landscapes through carbon intensive processes, high levels of air and ground water pollution and toxic dumping. Second, we summarize our research results on the human and social impacts of this process in Steel Valley in South Africa. The final section considers possible societal responses to these local crises. Can society challenge the extraordinary power of these companies? Can the scattered instances of resistance at a local level such as Steel Valley coalesce with the new labour internationalism (NLI) initiatives aimed at ‘working space’ (Lambert & Gillan 2010) to defend nature and society? Such a consideration brings to the fore perennial questions of place, space and power.

**Accumulation, Nature & Society**

Analysis of ArcelorMittal’s global expansion reveals how the commodification of nature is a product of capital accumulation. Within this logic, ‘nature becomes purely an object for humankind’ (Marx 1973 p407, 410). We define this aspect of commodification as a process in which nature is ‘being seriously altered’ in a manner detrimental to society. Beyond very high CO\text{2} emissions, ArcelorMittal’s steel works alter nature through a release of a toxic cocktail of harmful chemicals into the atmosphere and ground water.
surrounding its facilities. These include a range of carcinogenic dioxins as well as fine particle pollution. These particles cause lung damage and heart disease, whilst the gaseous pollutants such as sulphur dioxide constrict breathing and trigger asthma. Contamination of water sources with cadmium for example, have resulted in a range of serious health effects (Cock & Munnik 2006). Specifying the character of these changes in the constitution of air and water is an ‘especially illuminating window’ to view capitalism-nature relationships (Castree 2003, p. 278). Where affected communities sought natures defense states were threatened with the closure of facilities. The following terse narrative of ArcelorMittal’s is revealing in this regard. Concentrating initially in the global south, majority owner and CEO Lakshmi Mittal built a close relationship with political elites, honing a strategy of purchasing state owned steel producers to create the world’s largest steel corporation within less than 40 years.¹ The company now views itself as the only truly global steelmaker.

This process was initiated when Mittal expanded beyond his family’s ownership of several small steel mills in Calcutta in the 1950s through developing political links with autocratic rulers in the south, first with Suharto in Indonesia in the 1970s followed by ventures in Trinidad and Tobago in 1989 and then Mexico. In each instance he was granted privileged access to privatized state assets. The corporation’s characteristic accumulation pattern was established by these interventions in the global south, whereby state-owned steel assets were targeted and competitive advantage gained through accessing cheap, unprotected labour. For instance, as a conditionality for receipt of IMF and World Bank financing the Trinidad government had been required to privatize state industries for a fraction of their previous value. Mittal acquired Mexico’s third largest steel producer, Sibalsa for US$25 million in direct financing for assets reduced in value to $220 million. This deal included a modern integrated mini-mill complex built by the Mexican government at a cost of US$2.2 billion. Such a bargain was concluded because the government, in a run up to country’s 1995 financial crisis was under pressure from US and UK investors to reduce debt levels. As instances of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003), between 1994 and 1997 some of Mittal’s major acquisitions were former state-owned steel plants in Canada, Germany, Kazakhstan, and Ireland (Murphy 2008). Labour costs in the acquired plants were further reduced through lean production – restructuring based on downsizing and insecure short term contracts - which triggered a six week strike by the Steel Workers Union of Trinidad and Tobago. A report by the ILO (Moonilal 2001) noted the union’s continuing concerns about safety and environmental conditions at the plant.

Whilst the initial phase of accumulation focused on the global south (Indonesia, Caribbean, Mexico, and South Africa), the aspiration to become fully global led to interventions in North America and Europe. The Mexican assets were a foundation of Mittal’s expanding steel empire enabling the company to competitively position itself to export slab steel into the US market. However, attempts to acquire the Bar, Rod & Wire division of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation in the United States collapsed in 1993 when labour contract negotiations with the United Steelworkers of America were jettisoned, despite the union conceding substantially lower wages. The USWA district director claimed that ‘Ispat didn’t care about the workers or their communities, and didn't care
about making steel ... Ispat’s only interest was in getting a bargain basement deal and turning a quick profit’ (‘Steelworker Leaders Laud Members for their Crucial Role in Veritas Re-Opening of Bethlehem Steel Facilities’ 1994). Following the acquisition of the formerly state-owned Sidbec-Dosco in Canada, Mittal pursued further North American integration through major acquisitions of private steel companies (Inland Steel and International Steel Group -ISG). Yet during this period acquisitions of former state enterprises continued in South Africa, the focus on the discussion below, and particularly in Europe (Ireland, Romania Czech Republic, Bosnia, Macedonia and Poland). This was consolidated in 2006 when the steel giant Arcelor was acquired to establish ArceorMittal creating the centralized and concentrated power of a single global corporation in the steel sector.

The highly concentrated financial structure of the company facilitated this remarkable expansion. A single family (Mittal) own forty per cent of this global corporation. The driving force in the family is Lakshmi N Mittal, one of the world’s ten richest billionaires from 2004 to 2012. He is the richest person in the United Kingdom. Mittal exerts his power within the corporation at three levels: firstly, as CEO he exerts operational control or possession of the corporation; secondly, he maintains a high level of legal ownership with 40.84 per cent of common stock in 2009 (down from 45.05 in 2008); and thirdly, given the comparative concentration of his block of shares compared to the more dispersed stakes of other shareholders (including private and sovereign investment funds), Mittal has clear economic ownership of the company (including allocation of resources and strategic direction). The decision to list on stock exchanges in six different countries militates against the emergence of large blocks of shares with voting rights comparable to those controlled by Mittal. The scale of this wealth is expanded, in part, by refusals to invest in technologies to protect nature. Exploiting nature thus appears to be integral to the logic of accumulation wherein guardianship of the environment is viewed as an unacceptable imposition.

In many places, citizens have challenged this logic. For example, in the United States the Ohio Citizens Action Group was formed and campaigned against serious air pollution from Mittal’s steel mill, labelling Lakshmi a 19th century ‘cowboy capitalist’ who focused on shareholder value above all else. They claim that such an orientation has resulted in an appalling human toll in injury, illness and death related to serious environmental destruction which, they assert, renders his extraordinary personal wealth obscene. Corporate leaders attack the view that personal wealth is in any way linked to corporate practice. Claiming thus is a communist conspiracy long since dismissed as having any relevance in the modern globalized economy. The class character of these relations are exemplified in the case of Irish Steel – a Mittal subsidiary purchased in 1995 and shut down after one day’s notice because of the ‘unviable’ costs of energy and labour and requirements for new pollution-control equipment. The workforce had tentatively agreed to wage reductions, but Mittal had closed the facility before the plant’s union could formally respond. The union highlighted that at the time of this ‘corporate restructure’ Lakshmi spent €50 million on his daughter’s London wedding. Earlier he had paid €70 million for his London home (Mooney & Fahy 2004).
ArcelorMittal workers in Liege, Belgium, who lost their livelihoods and saw their community destroyed, after the corporation first shut down the factory because of the potential costs of carbon dioxide quotas and then following the slowdown associated with the global financial crisis, expressed their anger in class terms: The firm has concentrated production in lower-cost sites across Europe since the onset of the financial downturn in 2008:

When the global corporation decided to close down the factory in Liege, we knew 10 000 jobs would be lost. We refused to accept this logic. They plan to close the plant in 2005 and shift production to Brazil, China and Poland where the workforce can be exploited.

They told us that this decision was final and was not subject to negotiation or discussion at local level. The decision had been taken by the Board and there would be no change.

There is a strong global economic logic to this. The global corporation sees itself as building history and becoming so powerful that its power extends beyond regions and continents. They see themselves as the real masters – masters of countries, police forces, citizens. They are white collar bandits that decide such things.

They have only one aim – to become a leading global steel corporation. To achieve this they are willing to break any laws, conventions and rights on their way to building their power base. They don’t take account of human beings and communities. They don’t care about pollution.

They don’t discuss or negotiate. They only present a monologue.

They are out to dismantle an entire industry in a region. This is worse than a war, much worse than death – this is the dismantling of the solidarity of the working class.3

The corporation frames its role differently. Mittal is committed to ‘community welfare’ through ‘investing in local communities’ as a component of corporate social responsibility (Dawley, Stenning & Pike 2008). The company claims it has rescued ailing steel plants and communities from ‘the verge of collapse’ (Connolly 2002). However, evidence of community impacts contradicts this corporate perspective. For example, in the fore mentioned sudden Irish closure, after being ‘sold’ the facilities for one Irish Punt five years earlier, the company left ‘the Irish government and the European Steel and Coal Commission … with the cost of the redundancy package for the company’s 407 former workers’ (Summers 2002) and ‘a €30 million bill to clean up the derelict site’ (Mooney & Fahy 2004). The Irish Times reported that the company had operated an unlicensed hazardous waste dump where the plant was located (Hogan 2001).

In the following section, we will provide a deeper insight into the human cost of Mittal’s strategy through our research into the company’s continuing pollution of air and
groundwater at their steel mill in Vanderbijlpark. Our survey of 500 people complemented by depth interviews uncovers the human toll. The factory – another privatization sale – placed into private hands one of South Africa’s most profitable production facilities, yet the corporation externalized the environmental costs of severe pollution onto the local community. The research shows that this has had a devastating impact on the powerless poor, who lived in Steel Valley. Despite a long struggle they have failed to stop the pollution, or to obtain compensation for the loss of their health and livelihoods.

Steel Valley: a contaminated community

Before 1990 Steel Valley was made up of over 500 smallholdings. Most of the 3 000 residents were resourceful working class people who combined subsistence agriculture with wage work at the steel mill and in the nearby towns of Vereeniging and Vanderbijlpark. It was a well-established area, one informant had lived in the area for 5 generations, and in a sample of 100 residents, the majority (73 per cent) had lived in the area for more than 10 years. Many kept livestock such as chickens, cattle and pigs and grew a variety of vegetables for their own consumption and to sell in nearby towns. It was a very fertile area, as one informant expressed it, ‘If you planted a feather you’d get a chicken’.

Whilst the pollution of steel valley began state ownership and the subsequent privatization, Mittal simply continued on with these practices when they purchased the mill in 2001. Tragically, the externalization of environmental costs at the Vanderbijlpark mill has destroyed the Steel Valley community. Mittal’s purchase of the steel mill included a gigantic slag heap and very large effluent dams. The steel mill poured its effluents into unlined dams, contaminating the ground water on which the community depended. The dams have been used since 1952, when steel production started, but have never been lined to prevent this effluent drainage into the groundwater. The steel mill also released effluent into an unlined canal from which the Steel Valley smallholders drew water for irrigation. More than five decades of pollution has poisoned the groundwater with a toxic mix of heavy metals, dissolved salts and hydrocarbons derived from coal. By 1996 the pollution plume from the effluent dams was thought to cover up to seven square kilometers. Local people maintain that the pollution plume is moving east, supplemented by the leachate from the slag heap, which has not been capped.

A comprehensive report on air quality in the area identified 58 polluting industrial and mining activities in the Vaal Triangle, with the Vanderbijlpark steel mill the top polluter for sulphur dioxide and (after Eskom and Sasol) the third largest source of carbon dioxide (Scorgie 2004). According to South Africa’s National Air Quality Officer, Peter Lukey, ‘there is enough evidence to assume that the rights of citizens in the Vaal to clean air that is not harmful to their health, as required in the constitution, are being violated.’

The government has released a damning report detailing environmental legislation contraventions and non-compliance. The report comes after inspectors (known as the Green Scorpions) assessed the steel giant’s plant at the end of May 2007 as part of
their investigation into the environmental legislation compliance by the iron, steel and ferroalloy industries. The contraventions include dumping of hazardous waste on a prohibited site and significant pollution of surface and ground water with phenols, iron, oil, fluoride and other hazardous substances. Criminal prosecutions have not been ruled out (The Star 26.7.2007).

This pollution has destroyed what was once the vibrant agricultural community of Steel Valley. Crops have failed and animals have sickened and died or been born with genetic defects. Lives have been destroyed. In 500 questionnaires completed by local people, symptoms of serious illness were revealed, which ranged from kidney disease, memory loss, skin ailments and various types of cancers. Two informants have died since this research began in 2003. Tests of 26 people for a 2001 court case showed higher cadmium levels than the South African reference levels. Those tested showed DNA breakages 30 per cent higher than the SA reference level and 50 per cent higher than the international reference level. As informant Willie Cook states, ‘The whole area is actually sick’. Only two of 500 smallholders remain in the area.

Strike Matsepo is one of the small farmers who lost his health and livelihood from the pollution of the groundwater around Vanderbijlpark by the steel mill. Now aged 74, he worked for Coca Cola at Vanderbijlpark. With the political transition, 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 nine calves, five sheep, six goats, three tortoises, one pig, seven dogs, 30 chickens and four cats.’ His sister who lived with him tested with high levels of cadmium in her blood before she died in 2004. Strike’s brother, Jacob, lived with constant physical pain. Laboratory tests established abnormally high levels of lead in his system, which an expert described as ‘unusual for a person not employed in the metal industry’. Strike himself has had several long periods in 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. Strike states, ‘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’.

**Challenging the Logic of Global Corporations**

This destruction of nature and society is the product of the logic of accumulation which includes minimizing costs to expand the rate of profit. Since this strategic choice is made by leaders of global corporations, the question is, how might they be held to account, given the exponential growth of their corporate power? How might these corporations be regulated to protect nature and society? The affected community in Steel Valley attempted to mobilize locally in order to bring state power to their defence
in the face of the environmental calamity. Markowitz and Rosner (2002, p. 2) frame the problem thus:

"How can the physical environment be protected from the actions of huge multinational corporations whose activities have, until recently, gone virtually unchallenged and unregulated? How can people separated by language, politics, nationality and culture come together to challenge corporations whose power transcends national boundaries? How can the poor and disenfranchised have their voices heard?"

A number of Steel Valley citizens chose to resist, demonstrating impressive qualities of courage, initiative and tenacity against this global opponent. They organized at a local level, forming the Steel Valley Crisis Committee (SVCC) and mobilizing the local community into action. They engaged the steel mill, the courts and the government demanding the pollution crisis be dealt with. They mobilized non-violent action in their search for justice. Actions included a protest march to the steel mill in 2001 and picketing action at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Strategies tested litigation in the form of three private legal actions to stop the pollution and win compensation, an approach to the Constitutional Court, media campaigns, appeals to Iscor/Mittal, appeals to the Department of Water Affairs and to Presidents Mandela and Mbeki directly, mass protest action, and participation in consultative processes and forums with Iscor/Mittal and the local state. Despite all these actions they failed to gain redress of the continuing pollution and compensation to the victims, an outcome reflecting the new geometries of power identified in the introduction.

The failure of these local struggles was determined by the South African state, which, in its commitment to the global neoliberal market model, viewed its role as one of enticing global investment through creating the the most enticing globally competitive conditions in South Africa. The political leadership did not wish to jeopardize investment by signalling to the global business ‘community’ that it would be prepared to intervene on the side of the local community. Consequently, Steel Valley residents were bereft of political allies. The failure of local resistance exposed weaknesses. These included the weak state of environmental regulation in South Africa; the absence of the labour movement and a mass based environmental movement and finally, the largely hidden nature of pollution. The failure of local resistance maybe summarized thus. Firstly, above all, the impact on nature is considered secondary compared to the corporation’s strategic importance to the country as the manufacturer of steel, critical to downstream industries, including construction, mining, car production and various manufacturers, especially the arms industry. Pollution concerns are subordinated to the promotion of manufacturing and jobs.

Secondly, against this unified power of corporation and state, a divided and contaminated community appears powerless. The residents never formed a strong, cohesive community. There were social, racial and ideological divisions separating white from black, farm workers from their employers and widely divergent political affiliations, ranging from support for the far right-wing to involvement in the liberation struggle. Furthermore, overall the community was poor, lacking in resources and
geographically scattered over a large area with only poor transport available. Health problems and anxieties about the future drained people’s energies. The social impact of toxic contamination created profound fears and anxieties. In general, responses of the majority emphasized individual self-reliance, rather than any animating notion of collective support and solidarity. Another divisive factor was that many of the smallholders were employed at the steel mill. As one informant said, ‘You don’t pick a fight with your bread and butter.’

Thirdly, this situation was further compounded by the state’s weak environmental regulation. The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA), passed in 1998, establishes a strong legal framework for sustainable environmental management. However, specific laws remain fragmentary, enforcement is weak, and there is confusion over local, provincial, and national responsibilities. Official warnings of groundwater pollution by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) date back to 1961. They include research commissioned by the then owner of the steel mill, ISCOR. But no effective action followed, and DWAF failed to enforce compliance. While the apartheid state largely ignored environmental concerns, the post-apartheid state has formulated progressive policies. The Bill of Rights includes the right to live in a safe and healthy environment and the concept of environmental justice is enshrined in the National Environmental Management Act. However, authorities have a weak enforcement capacity, and there is a problematic fragmentation of responsibility for pollution between different spheres of government (local, provincial and national).

Fourthly, the labour movement was absent from this dispute. Since 2006, there have been frequent calls at COSATU Congresses for the nationalization of Mittal, including strong statements in 2009 by the President of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), but neither of the two main trade unions operating in the area, Solidarity and the NUMSA, which represents 200,000 workers nation-wide were active in the environmental struggle against the steel mill. According to Samson Mokoena, chair of the SVCC, ‘the trade unions wouldn’t participate in the SVCC protest against ISCOR, because they are afraid of losing their jobs and also they didn’t want to look anti-government’. This insecurity has been deepened by the large number of retrenchments at the steel mill with the number of workers reduced from 44,000 in 1980 to 12,000 in 2004. NUMSA embarked on a series of strikes against Mittal’s price increases starting in 2006 saying it feared that thousands of jobs in the downstream market were under threat as a result. In late 2007 the union issued a press statement expressing its grave concern about Mittal’s lack of interest in ‘eliminating hazards faced by workers on a daily basis in their workplace and in their communities’. The recognition of the connection between household and the workplace is critical to mobilizing the labour movement in the environmental justice struggle. This mobilization is beginning. In 2011 COSATU formulated a strong policy on climate change and NUMSA is particularly progressive in its warnings about the necessity for a class analysis of the just transition approach to a low carbon economy, its warnings about ‘green capitalism’ and how it is organizing around the demand for a socially owned renewable energy sector (Cock, 2011).
Fifthly, a sense of powerless created by the non-presence of unionism was further reinforced by the 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. Today there is considerable grassroots environmental activity such as communal vegetable gardens and protests over the privatization of water but there is insufficient commitment to mobilizing for the right to a healthy clean environment. 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 and this has tended to de-prioritize environmental campaigning.

Sixthly, much of the pollution is hidden. In this instance, the steel mill's pollution of the air and ground water was a hidden, undramatic, insidious process of contamination, which evolved over a 40-year period. This is a typical pattern. Much pollution is slow-working, hidden and obscure. Environmental risks from pollutants have to pass through a process of social recognition. Ulrich Beck argues that a number of factors make this social recognition difficult: firstly, the risks are ubiquitous in urban-industrial society (Beck 2000, p. 41); secondly, much pollution is invisible to direct sensory experience and understanding; thirdly, many of the threats are only detectable and explicable through the application of specialized forms of scientific knowledge. Only through such sophisticated scientific knowledge and technology can the traces of toxic metals in water be detected and the connection with ill health made - a level of knowledge which the Steel Valley community lacked.

Furthermore, this is complicated by a reductionist science which dominates medical and legal thinking. This reductionism attempts to link specific toxic substances to specific diseases (Markowitz & Rosner 2002). Dr Phillip Loyd, a professor of chemical engineering and expert witness in the court case of 16 applicants from Steel Valley, stressed that 'you cannot always say that that chemical causes that disease'. Instead he claims that it is a 'cocktail' of toxic substances which damages health. While toxicology cannot pinpoint a specific cause, an epidemiological approach can recognize patterns of unnecessary death and disease above the average for a population without pollution (Davis 2002).

Finally, the most important reason for the failure of the Steel Valley struggle to stop the pollution and obtain compensation was the dominance of the growth discourse. Environmental issues have shallow roots in government thinking, because they are overshadowed by an emphasis on growth. The steel mill was allowed to externalize environmental costs with devastating impacts on the surrounding community, because steel production was understood to be central to growth, particularly to the development of downstream industries and jobs. Despite Sen's (1983) insistence that growth is not the same thing as development which expands human capabilities, the debates on economic strategy within the ANC, COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP) are about different paths to growth. There is no questioning of the notion of growth as the central goal of development programs. But development understood as
growth depends on the availability of natural resources. Both the apartheid and the post-apartheid state have protected both state and private corporate polluters of these resources in the name of growth and development. This has involved the violation of people's constitutional right 'to an environment that is not harmful to their health and well-being' (Bill of Rights. South African Constitution, 1996). For all these reasons the local campaign failed. Does this signal the end of the road for the gradually poisoned community of Steel Valley? What of the argument if this local struggle is globalized there might be a chance of success? In this final section of the paper we analyze the possibility of developing global responses to a powerful global corporation such as ArcelorMittal.

**Globalizations**

The power of corporations such as Mittal is growing through a process of ‘globalization from above’. Lakshmi said of his bid for the steel giant Arcelor, ‘This is a great opportunity for us to take the steel industry to the next level. Our customers are becoming global, our suppliers are becoming global, everyone is looking for a stronger global player’. As one banker close to the Arcelor bid said, ‘This is globalization in action” (Timmons 2006).

The demise of local action by Steel Valley residents did not pre-empt initiatives to challenge this global corporation at a global scale. At the time of Mittal's bid in 2004, activists from the polluted Vaal Triangle linked with environmental justice activists in other countries to demand a redistribution of power and resources in a process of ‘globalization from below’. This change in scale appeared to herald a new potential whereby these grassroots communities sought to engage the global centres of power. Symbolic actions were globally transmitted giving a sense of movement with a common agenda against Mittal. For example, the Steel Valley Crisis Committee nominated Mittal for the 2005 ‘corpse awards’ for corporate environmental abuse. The award was conceived by the environmental NGO Groundwork and was cited by Ohio Citizens Action in their submission to the European Commission, opposing Mittal’s bid for the European steel company Arcelor in February 2006. The US organization with 100,000 members mobilizes against Mittal’s cancer causing air pollution from Mittal Steel’s Cleveland steel works. Their objection drew the Commission’s attention to poor safety problems at Mittal’s Kazakh coal plant and the planned displacement of people in Jharkland, India.

In May 2008 a new coalition of global activists developed a focus - Global Action on ArcelorMittal - and targeted the corporation at its annual general meeting in Luxembourg where they presented a shadow annual report (Salgado 2008, p. 4). As South African environmental activist Bobby Peek states, ‘Shareholder activism and shadow reporting is not a unique campaigning strategy… (but) what makes this action different is the fact that for the first time we find a common cause for global action not against a multi-national company from the North plundering the South, but rather a multi-national company from the global South, which acts in just the same way’ (Cited in (cited in Aitken 2008, p. 2). On the day of the Annual General Meeting there were parallel protests in the US, Romania, India, Kazakhstan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the
Czech Republic and Ukraine at the same time as a protest march against the Vanderbijlpark steel mill. The South African campaign is driven by the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance, a coalition of 15 different organizations active in the Vaal Triangle against Sasol, Eskom and Samancor. At the time of writing NUMSA has withdrawn its earlier participation. According to Phinias Malapela, the chairperson of VEJA, “ArcelorMittal has a hold on them.”

These globalized initiatives are indeed positive development for they evidence common local concerns being transmitted into action at a global scale. These actions carry the seed of a global social justice movement which needs to be envisaged as a movement of citizens dispossessed by the freedoms of trade, investment and finance, which has consolidated corporate power over state politics, facilitating the plunder of nature and the destruction of persons, their families and society. Mittal was swift to respond to these pressures from below by emphasizing its commitment to CSR, which was reflected through its meetings with affected local communities including the VEJA, while at the same time shoring up their essential position on the environment by negotiation with the South African government on air quality emission standards, thereby seeking to delay the implementation of emissions standards for the steel industry. However, local people have received no compensation for the loss of their health and livelihoods and the corporation’s 8,000 page master plan to prevent further pollution is still secret.

There are obstacles to the further growth and empowerment of this aspiring global environmental justice movement in the making, the first being the failure of the existing union movement, local, national and global to link with this potential social movement. Firstly, in considering building a counter power to global corporations the issue of trade union engagement is critical. As Jakopovich (2009, p. 75) writes, ‘Environmentalists are workers’ obvious potential allies in their efforts to advance workplace health and safety, and also to tackle environmental concerns of working-class communities: for workers bear the brunt of environmental degradation and destruction, both in terms of health and quality of life issues’. The media promote a false dichotomy in portraying labour-environmental relations as a trade-off between jobs and the environment. As Kazis and Grossman write, ‘Environmental protection not only creates jobs, it also saves jobs… Forestry, tourism, agriculture and the growing leisure and outdoor recreation industries are all important sources of jobs which depend directly upon clear water, clean air, and wilderness for their continuation and growth’ (cited by Jakopovich 2009, p. 80). However, for this aspiration to be realized, differences between union identities and roles are of significance (Lambert forthcoming). In this article Lambert distinguishes between unions viewing themselves as a movement for justice and those which see their role as an agent of free market restructuring. The former seek to engage both the workplace and civil society, whereas the latter are workplace bound and relatively disconnected from wider issues, except where these are seen to have relevance for jobs and working conditions; the former emphasize the social movement features of trade unionism whilst the latter are preoccupied with their role in the state industrial relations system. Civil society movements such as the emergent global environmental justice movement have potential to engage these contradictions by encouraging unions
to make strategic choices for civil society action, without detracting from workplace struggle.

These union contradictions are replicated at the level of global unionism. Established labour internationalism (ELI) institutionally expressed through the International Trade Union Council (ITUC) and through the various sectoral Global Union Federations (GUFs) are, apart from some notable exceptions, largely dominated by a politics of partnership shaped by the European experience, which is based on a benign view of global corporations. Evidence reveals that this orientation has precluded challenging corporations on their environmental and social record. The Mittal case illustrates the limitations of this partnership approach between global unions and corporations. The International Metal Workers Federation (IMF) organized a global meeting of fifty two union participants from Mittal, representing seventeen unions. The forum mainly focused on Mittal’s merger with Arcelor. These unionists appeared oblivious to the corporations actual record on society and the environment, with a polite request for ‘more open communications’ and ‘respect for human rights’. A larger meeting was held in Montreal in 2007, which resulted in an agreement ‘for advancing Workers’ Rights’. Significantly, the emphasis was on building a partnership with management. The opening paragraph of the agreement stated, ‘We will work together cooperatively and strategically as global partners, to advance worker rights throughout the company’. The agreement called for a strong union role in ‘corporate decision making’ since only ‘a successful company provides job security’. The agreement specified goals: union recognition; stronger bargaining agreements; safe and healthy workplaces; full access to information; the elimination of outsourcing; capital investment for upgraded and environmentally sound facilities; and implementation of ILO standards. The statement concluded, ‘We believe that identifying common ground between workers, unions, and management is a key to developing a business strategy’. Management were present at this meeting, including Laksmi, who addressed the gathering, saying ‘the bar on health and safety standards had to be raised across the globe’. A decision was made to form a World Company Council (WCC) and a small committee was formed to draft its constitution and they asked management to fund the next meeting of the WCC, which will focus on safety issues. Mittal supports this initiative, describing it as a ‘team approach vital for the partnership essential to the company becoming a ‘world-class premier steel producer’. The company signed a health and safety agreement with IMF complementing the International Framework Agreement signed in September 2005.

The character of the relationships between the IMF, its WCC for ArcelorMittal and senior company management are defined by the fact that these are joint meetings with senior management, paid for by the company, which reach an easy consensus on the need for environmentally sound facilities and safe working conditions. However, as the research evidence in this paper shows, the destruction of nature and its impacts on society continue on unabated despite these joint union/management meetings, presented by management as ‘a team approach’ and the signed International Framework Agreement (IFA). This approach of ELI reflects another globalization, namely the globalization of European styled corporate partnerships devoid of the recognition of conflicting interests with regard to nature, work and society. Closures, relocations, work restructuring, downsizing, outsourcing and the impacts of production
on nature are non-negotiable – they are off the table. Thus these partnership forums allow no voice on the most critical of issues affecting the security of workers and the health of the planet. Such processes detach union leadership from workers who experience the corporation as a destructive force in their work (while they have a job) and in their communities, often proximate to the mills and therefore subject to a slow poisoning.

There is however, another globalization, characterized as a New Labour Internationalism (NLI), which is grounded in the global south bringing together democratic unions from this zone of the global economy, which have a history and culture of social movement struggle. This tendency is has evolved through a networked global movement named SIGTUR (The Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights), which links thirty two countries in the global south across four continents. Unlike the northern politics summarized above, SIGTUR is critically engaged with neoliberalism and analyses the strategies of corporations through Marx’s theory of capital accumulation. Hence an alternative politics of uncompromising opposition to global corporations is central. Whilst there is a political consensus, the cardinal challenge remains: given the concentration of corporate power over nation states, how might a counter power develop? What forms of action might be powerful enough to successfully defend nature, work security and the needs of society? A proper analysis of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that the significance of the emergence of a resistance movement to neoliberal globalization in the south is that these unions are testing logistical power as a way of challenging global corporations and their allies in nation states and institutions of global governance. Without harnessing new forms of power, the destruction of nature by giant corporations such as ArcelorMittal will continue unabated. However, a note of caution needs to be sounded. NLI is only as strong as its local bases and with only a few exceptions, unions at this level are undergoing intense contestation between resistance and accommodation in relation to neoliberalism and the corporate power of global corporations. Thus even the COSATU leadership is divided between lobbying elites and organizing movement campaigns.

Conclusion

Karl Polanyi argued that societies based on the self-regulating market would give rise to a counter-movement defending society and nature against the destructive power of such a market orientation. The research on the residents of Steel Valley, South Africa at the centre of this paper provides evidence of the linkage between the destruction of nature and the destruction of persons, families and society. Local counter movements did arise, but despite the courage, determination and political imagination of participants, these moments of collective action shaped the CSR rhetoric of Mittal but were powerless to change a business plan, which has had dire social and environmental consequences. The paper considered the potential of a global response to this predicament, focusing on global meetings of workers organized by the IMF. However, these meetings, based as they were on a European model of partnership, kept discussion of the company’s impacts on nature off the agenda and so these ArcelorMittal sponsored events only served to reinforce corporate propaganda on the
environment. In contrast, SIGTUR as a movement of the south represents a social movement resistance tradition, which, notwithstanding unevenness and contestations from within, at least represents a spirit of resistance, seeking to defend nature and society. Much now depends on political will and imagination to organizationally link local environmental and societal struggles within and between nations.

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1 Just under 70 per cent of its acquisitions were of state owned steel mills.
2 The company is headquartered in Luxembourg and has a market capitalisation of US$ 40.23 billion. It has listings on the stock exchanges of New York, Amsterdam, Paris, Brussels, Luxembourg as well as on the Spanish stock exchanges of Barcelona, Bilbao, Madrid and Valencia
3 Union delegates presentation at a meeting of the European Social Forum in Brussels in May 2003. Lambert was a participant at that meeting where he recorded their presentation.
4 Interview with Peter Lukey, 2 August 2006
5 Interview with Matsepo, Vanderbijlpark. 22 June 2005
6 Interview with Mokoena, Vanderbijlpark, 2005.
7 Interview, Johannesburg 22.9.2009
8 The drive to highlight the linkages between these struggles comes from the Latin American participants, who are committed to the global climate justice movement.