

# RESISTANCE TO COAL AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF A JUST TRANSITION IN SOUTH AFRICA



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by Jacklyn Cock  
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**Society, Work  
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*'the making and unmaking of social order'*

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*Cover photo by Rob Symons:  
Mr Mtshali was relocated against his wishes to  
accommodate the Tendele coal mine, Somkhele, KZN.  
Back cover photo by Keran Ducasse:  
Somkhele mine demonstration.*

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## Abbreviations and acronyms

AMCU	Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union
CER	Centre for Environmental Rights
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
GET	Global Environmental Trust
HEJN	Highveld Environmental Justice Network
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
MACUA	Mining Affected Communities United in Action
MACs	Mining affected communities
MEJO	Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation
MCEJO	Mpukunyoni Community Environmental Justice Organisation
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUMSA	National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa
VEJA	Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance
WAMUA	Women Affected by Mining United in Action

## Research sites



The research presented here was conducted at four research sites:

Somkhele is a cluster of 10 villages in KwaZulu-Natal between Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park and Mtubatuba with a population of about 4,000. Their battle with Tendele coal mine started in 2004. Over the years, the mine has expanded and currently operates over a vast area affecting thousands of people.

The other three research sites – Phola, Vosman, and Arbor – are situated near Emalahleni (meaning ‘the place of coal’) in Mpumalanga which has been described as one of the most polluted places in the world. All are surrounded by coal plants and are spaces of displacement, deprivation and exclusion.

## 1. Introduction

The central question addressed in this paper is whether resistance to the expansion of coal mining and burning could drive a socially and environmentally just transition from fossil fuels in South Africa. This would involve a shift from the dominant view of coal as a source of energy, jobs and foreign exchange, to coal as a driver of inequality and environmental damage. The paper suggests that transformative resistance requires creating 'counter-power' which challenges coal on every level, builds new alliances which generate solidarity, and is potentially infused by imaginative visions of a 'just transition' to another world beyond coal. This could embed the anti-coal struggle in a social movement for an alternative development path. After discussing the different conceptions of 'resistance' and a 'just transition', the paper examines oppositional agency in three social spaces: mining affected communities, the environmental justice movement and the labour movement.

## 2. Resistance

'Resistance' is an ambiguous category. It is multi-layered and multi-dimensional, containing different sometimes contradictory meanings and forming a **continuum** of opposition rather than a sharp and unambiguous binary between acquiescence and confrontation. It operates on different scales ranging from localised contestations, which are scattered and small-scale, to transnational advocacy, and involves widely different paths to agency. Collective action involving marches, 'strikes', picketing, and road blocks are not the only forms of resistance. It is ever changing and is sometimes informal, and hidden. Scott (1985) warns that by focusing on visible, historical 'events' such as organised rebellions or collective action, we can easily miss subtle but powerful forms of 'everyday resistance'. This paper places small acts of defiance – such as damaging a fence erected by a mine that blocks access to an important source of water for villagers, or demands from individual households for compensation for homes

damaged during mine blasting, or for funding for the social ceremonies at the reburial of ancestral graves – on a continuum of resistance.

Whether ambivalent or direct, the question of asymmetrical **power** relations is central to understanding resistance. "In a relationship of power, the dominant often has something to offer... The subordinate thus has many grounds for ambivalence about resisting the relationship" (Ortner, 2008:175). In many mining affected communities (MACs), a dependence on coal creates socially complex, ambiguous patterns of resistance, which sometimes undermine the possibilities of a just transition.

During the course of this research in KwaZulu-Natal and the Mpumalanga Highveld where most of the coal mines and power stations are situated, it became clear that the objectives of resistance vary. While there is extensive collective action relating to coal, it is NOT generally directed against coal *per sé*, or coal as a form of extractivism. Especially in Mpumalanga, there is some rejection of the central change implied in the notion of a just transition – namely, the closure of the coal mines and coal powered stations.

It follows that most collective action in MACs are protests on a different scale about how Eskom, the state and the mining corporations operate. This generates claims and demands regarding issues such as employment practices, adherence to environmental regulations, compensation for relocation of graves, damage to homes from blasting, the loss of land and land-based livelihoods, and consultation in decision making, especially in relation to how mining licenses are allocated. There is little generic critique of coal as a means of accumulation at the grassroots level.

This is largely due to three factors: firstly the communities living adjacent to coal stations are marked by high levels of poverty and unemployment. For some – especially in Mpumalanga – there is a deep material dependence on the mines both in relation to employment (ranging from small, temporary contracts to full time jobs) as well as to the provision of a market for the extensive informal sector activities on which many households depend

On 21 April 2016, over a thousand Fuleni residents forced the Regional Mining Development Environmental Committee to abort their site visit to Fuleni for Ibutho Coal's proposed open cast mine on the boundary of the iMfolozi Wilderness Area.  
Photo: Rob Symons



as both buyers and sellers, as well as a dependence on coal as a source of energy, or the delivery of water by some mining corporations. Secondly, while people do not think about coal in a single, monolithic way, research found little understanding of the relation between climate change, carbon emissions, mine closure and the possibilities of a just transition. In all the interviews and workshops conducted there was little mention of climate change by participants. The notion of a just transition was found to be largely declarative, lacking substantive content, unrelated to everyday lived experience and failing to provide any compelling alternative vision of a world beyond coal.

In both social spaces – of MACs and the labour movement – it seems there is little recognition that the closure of coal mines is ongoing and inevitable as the climate crisis deepens. The labour movement has mainly retreated into a defensive position focusing on protecting existing jobs in the energy sector, and NUM in particular has defended coal and the possibilities of developing clean coal technology. In the media, the meaning of a just transition has shrunk to mean a shift to a new energy regime, though a strong theme articulated by environmental justice activists is the demand that the fossil fuel economy be dismantled *in toto*. But overall, there is an absence of what Gill (2009) calls ‘transformative resistance’ which involves collective action relating to both negation and creation, in this case not only mobilising against the agenda of the state and the coal industry but also promoting an alternative social order. The central challenge then is to make the concept of a just transition part of a transformation agenda.

*The dumps from Tendele coal mine encroach on farms in Somkhele.  
Photo: Rob Symons*



### 3. Contested meanings of a just transition

At present this is a vague and highly contested notion. While a transition from coal is underway slowly and unevenly, there is no certainty that the transition will be *just*, and the outcome of an inclusive and democratic process. This is despite increasing recognition of the negativities of coal burning and mining and of renewable energy becoming cheaper. Furthermore, the ecological disruption of climate change could provoke more authoritarian and repressive state policies.

Contemporary debates on a just transition are flawed in four respects: firstly the voices and lived experience of the two social categories most affected – coal workers and those living in communities adjacent to coal mines and coal-fired power stations – are not heard. Secondly, the concept has largely been appropriated by powerful elites, and thirdly, the fundamental cause of the climate crisis – the expansionist logic of capitalism – is avoided. Lastly, there is a failure to contextualise the notion in an African context, leading to dismissals on the grounds that “it is a northern notion that comes from highly developed countries and is not fair to us” (interview with NUM official Johannesburg, 16.5.2019).

In its origins in the global labour movement, the concept of a just transition involved more than a shift from fossil fuels and was marked by a tension between two broad approaches: a minimalist position that is primarily defensive, emphasizing social protection of vulnerable workers, shallow, reformist change with green jobs, ‘green growth’, and retraining and consultation. An alternative notion of a just transition involves transformative change with totally different forms of producing and consuming to create a more just and equal socialist society. This distinction relates to that drawn between ‘social dialogue’ and ‘social power’ approaches (Sweeney and Treat, 2018). The minimalist approach is illustrated by the series of ‘dialogues’ around the country since 2017 initiated by the National Planning Commission (NPC) with “relevant stakeholders”. But overall, the initiative has not penetrated deeply into local communities or attracted any support from labour, partly due to a neglect of the question of ‘justice’.

Community of Fuleni gather to block the road outside Ocilwane village.  
Photo: Rob Symons



Justice is not simply about the distribution of goods, but as Nussbaum (2000) and Sen (1999) argue, rather about their purpose: enabling people to develop the capabilities to create a good life. At present, 'a good life' is a remote possibility for precarious coal workers, especially those working underground and prone to serious lung and other diseases from inhaling coal dust, as well as for MACs.

This neglect may be traced to the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change where the word 'justice' appears only once and "amounts to an explicit disavowal of the concept" (Ghosh, 2016:158). Furthermore discussions of energy tend to have a narrow, technical focus and "rarely incorporate justice dimensions" (Healey and Barry, 2017:415). It is evident in how the transition is unfolding with an absence of planning. Eskom has a detailed decommissioning schedule for their existing coal generation. By 2040, only Majuba, Medupi and Kusile will remain. But there is no plan for the workers affected. In May 2019, Eskom admitted that it has no detailed plans or budgets in place even for the decommissioning of five older coal power plants – Grootvlei, Camden, Arnot, Kriel and Hendrina, – which are closing shortly with a loss of about 30,000 direct and indirect jobs. Two units at Hendrina have already been closed and the remaining eight will be 'parked' this year. However, the bulk of the workforce are 2,300 contract workers hired by labour brokers for whom Eskom is taking no responsibility (Eskom official interview Pullenhope, 8.1.2018). No provision has been made for retraining and reskilling to address the job losses involved in these closures. These workers have engaged in various protest actions as reportedly they feel that "the trade unions have let us down".

This neglect demonstrates how the concept of a just transition has largely lost its transformative potential in a process of elite capture and shrunk to mean market driven change for a new privatised, renewable energy regime. This is taking different forms: for example, Anglo American is holding onto its remaining coal mines and has no intention of selling its remaining export focused coal operations. Ndlovu (Anglo's Coal CEO) says this is because it regards itself as "a responsible operator – one that can better facilitate an accountable transition out of coal" (cited in *Business Day* 7.5.2019). There is no guarantee that this 'accountable transition' will be 'just' to workers, though probably to shareholders.

## 4. Resistance to coal in mining affected communities

The situation in KZN is very different to that on the Mpumalanga Highveld (see Skosana forthcoming). Overall collective action is inchoate, as elsewhere in South Africa, with diverse localised claims, grievances, demands and protests which express an opposition to the material conditions in many MACs and the power structures that maintain these conditions (Alexander, 2010, von Holdt and Naidoo, 2018, Dawson and Sinwell, 2012). Coal is often one element in mass protest actions about poverty, unemployment, the lack of service delivery, corruption or about specific councillors or *indunas*. Coal was, however, the triggering event in the mass burning of the municipal offices in a protest about the allocation of land adjacent to Phola township for two new coal mines. On 14 August 2018, 7,000 residents took to the streets to deliver a memorandum to the mayor, Linah Molatjie. When the meeting did not occur, the protest turned violent. Late that evening, the municipal building was burnt to the ground and all the offices inside completely destroyed.

For some, participating in protest actions provides a sense of power. For example, "When Gwede Mantashe came to speak here [Phola] people were eating him." But a contrary statement complained, "we speak and speak but we are just making noise". Disruptive actions such as blocking a road are part of a continuum of resistance, but the main demand of a 'mass strike' – which closed the coal mine adjoining Arbor for 2 weeks through blocking access roads with rocks and burning tyres – was jobs in the mine for local people. In the immediate term, such forms of agency leave extractivism intact and uncontested.

However, the most important point is that in many communities contaminated by coal, there is extensive



protest action. There is no evidence of the passive acquiescence that was found in an Argentinian contaminated community. This revealed “a complete absence of mass protest against toxic onslaught”, “toxic uncertainty” and a “silent habituation to contamination” (Auyero and Swistun, 2008:4). Here, residents of MACs are generally quite clear about the relation between illness and coal, especially the relation between respiratory diseases and air pollution.

Some collective agency involves violence, with the destruction of public and private property. The social composition of participants is highly gendered, with unemployed, male youths predominating in violent confrontations. An informant from Women Affected by Mining United in Action (WAMUA) stressed their commitment to non-violence and said, “Most of the rebels in our community are men; they burn the tyres and block the roads, it is better to exclude them”. Such outbreaks of collective violence ‘from below’ are often viewed as pathological, but as Wacquant writes of a different context, such collective violence by dispossessed youth is a response to “massive structural violence” unleashed on them by forces such as mass unemployment and stigmatisation (Wacquant, 2008:25). ‘Stigmatisation’ involves “the curse of being poor in the midst of a rich society in which participation in the sphere of consumption has become the *sine qua non* of social dignity – a passport to personhood if not citizenship...” (Wacquant, 2008:30). With one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, South Africa illustrates this pattern.

## Material dependence on coal

A material dependence on coal produces complex patterns of ambiguous resistance. For example, X is active in the grassroots organisation, Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA) and participated in the mass march of 5,000 people organised by MACUA at the giant coal power station, Kusile, but she sells *vetkoek* outside the mine.

Several informants expressed an ambivalence about coal because of this dependence, though some stressed that there were no alternative forms of employment or income generation. A member of a local organisation, which describes itself as ‘anti-coal mining’, has a contract as a cleaner at a local mine. Some communities receive a wheelbarrow of inferior quality coal from the mine regularly, and many depend on coal as a source of energy because either they are not connected to the electricity grid or ‘There are no trees here to warm our houses’. No alternatives to coal as a source of energy were mentioned. “Coal is good because it gives us electricity. With coal you can cook and keep warm.” Similarly, various ‘developmental’ initiatives by different mining corporations such as schools and a mobile clinic are used extensively.

Coal provides at least the possibility of employment and coal workers open a market for extensive informal sector activities. These forms of livelihoods are crucial in South Africa, as in the global south. Selling fruit and vegetables, ‘russian’ sausages, fish and chips, chicken parts, alcohol and cigarettes, panel beating and spraying, shoe repairs, washing clothes, operating driving schools,



*An exchange workshop in Somkhele: teaching the researchers about how the coal mines pollute the air and water, damage homes from blasting, remove ancestral graves and agricultural land. Photo: Jacklyn Cock*

hairdressing, fixing shoes, selling herbal medicine, provisioning taverns, and car repair were some of the range of activities identified in a scoping exercise on this dependence. Others rent backyard rooms to migrant coal miners, wash clothes and cars, drive the coal trucks and do cleaning work. In Arbor, one woman described how renting a backyard room to a coal miner brought in an income of R800 which provided 'food for the household'. The food items consumed were 'tea, sugar and mealie meal' (interview, Arbor 12.11.2018).

Some of the informal sector traders are from Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia and this evokes some ambivalent reactions. Informants in this study reported, "We do not hate them. They sometimes let us buy on credit" (Arbor) but other comments were: "We worry that they sell us food which has expired beyond the sell-by date," and "They steal our jobs and our houses." In Phola, "on one occasion people went from house to house to find mine workers who are not from the area and told them to go home." In many MACs there has been some looting of immigrant-owned spaza shops during protests.

Participants in exchange workshops, and the vast majority of the 120 informal traders and coal workers interviewed in the three different Mpumalanga communities – Arnot, Vosman and Phola – were opposed to the closure of coal mines for a range of reasons. One woman said, "If the mine closes how will I get compensation for the damage to my house from blasting?" The most common reason cited for opposing mine closures was increased unemployment. The possibility generated some degree of anxiety. "It is unclear what will happen to us if the mines close. What about the people who are starving out there?" Instead of understanding a just transition as a space for positive change, it was even claimed in a workshop, "this just transition will kill us". There were frequent appeals for information. "This just transition is very confusing. We people on the ground are not informed. And anyway the damage has already been done."

All these forms of dependence create what Victor Munnik calls a 'captive imaginary' which makes it difficult to conceptualise a just transition to a world without coal. In answer to the direct question, "what would a world without coal look like?", most answered in catastrophic terms. For example, "a world without coal would be dark and bad with no electricity, fewer jobs and more crime"; "it will be the death of my business. It will mean going back to live like our forefathers, no electricity, no petrol, no development"; "it would be a dark and dangerous world full of crime and hunger".

However there were exceptions. For example, one informant commented that a world without coal would "be healthier, because there will be no dust, our streams will be clean, our trees will be safe, no one will cut them down for mining operations. It will be a greener world without coal." "A world without coal would be a beautiful world, no sinkholes, no dust, no pollution, no dangers from all the coal trucks." Another coal worker said, "A

world without coal will be better, less sickness, clean water and available land. Also we will be healthy... our generation is a sick generation."

Most of their ideas of a 'good life' were focused on sufficient money: "Money opens every door of what you need" though there were also expressions of nostalgia for a rural and more self sufficient existence. Having access to land was frequently cited: "Having land is the key because you can do a lot of things yourself"; "having enough land so not having to rely on buying all the time." On the whole, their aspirations were extremely low, emphasising respectful treatment, and the delivery of basic services for example: "Being treated equal, having the same basic needs like water. Also having enough land to do farming so that you don't have to rely on other people for jobs". One very surprising statement from a contract coal worker at Anglo America's Izizwe mine maintained that a good life meant, "The government can close the mines and people get land to farm and education on how to use that land... When we dig coal we are destroying nature, coal must stay under the ground as it was meant to be under. Coal is destroying nature and people's lives."

The possibility of employment in coal mines and power stations also operates to smother resistance to coal. According to one informant, some of the participants in the Kusile march took part to demand jobs. A protest action which blocked access to Black Wattle Mine in Middelburg also included participants mainly concerned with obtaining jobs in the plant. This ambiguity and ambivalence means that reasons for participation in protest actions are often obscure and contradictory.

Nationally the majority of coal miners are migrants and younger and more skilled and better paid than in the past (Burton et al, 2018). Formally employed coal workers clearly benefit from their wages but also experience the impacts on their health. Sometimes a strange disassociation surfaces: as one coal miner commented, "I know the more we mine next to people's houses the more trouble we cause. Coal mining is affecting people in a very bad way. But this does not affect me because I have a job there now and money comes before everything else" (cited by Riven, 2018:33). A woman said, after losing her job with a coal company, "I only saw coal mining as a beautiful thing at the time. I did not realise all the negative impacts it caused because I was making money" (ibid.). Riven concluded that "community members are connecting coal mining with growth and job creation rather than with destruction and injustice" (Riven, 2018:34).

These miners are not always socially integrated into local communities. In the informal settlement of Mashakane near the Duvha power station, for example, an informant from KZN employed by the mine as a machine operator and earning between R9,000 and R10,000 a month 'depending on the shift' referred to some 300 'homeboys' employed there. Like them, he rents a backyard room in a shack and has done so for 13 years: "Many miners

live here and some bring their wives... but conditions are bad. Everyone has breathing problems. You feel there is something in your body and you have to buy water at R2 a container." Another informant says, "It is hard to get a job here... you need to pay someone or have a KZN connection... but I can't move to another area because transport would be too expensive" (interview Mashakane, 22.6.2018). Mashakane now has a population of 3,400 households living in desperate conditions (Olalde, 2017:3).

There is strong resentment that many of the miners are not locals, and this is a major focus in localised protest actions. "Very few locals are employed, we only get the coal dust"; "the locals are not strong enough, they fail the heat test". Some of these protests at the coal plants have some effect. For example, the Arbor 'strike action' resulted in management offering 10 young men training as drivers of heavy machinery, and another outside the Black Wattle Mine in Middelburg by about 200 young men secured job offers for two of them. In Mpumalanga the bulk of protest is about jobs, including jobs for local people in the coal mines.

Besides these complex connections to coal, both formal and informal, there is often a normalisation of toxic pollution as natural and inevitable. The causal connection between the more extreme weather events of accelerating climate change and carbon emissions are not directly obvious, and is a connection often elided in the popular media. In several community workshops in Mpumalanga, it was evident that climate change – the bedrock of the argument for a transition from coal – was not fully understood and seemed remote and abstract to desperately poor communities concerned with immediate survival issues.

Material dependence is not the only factor inhibiting resistance. There is also increasing repression, violence and intimidation from supporters of mining. One informant has experienced threats to burn her house "because she wants the coal mines to close". There is rising unemployment, and collusion between mining corporations, various levels of government and traditional authorities, particularly in KZN. The social dynamics are very different in Somkhele in KZN where the traditional authorities control land and exercise a close surveillance of villagers.

According to an environmental justice activist, "most people in Somkhele in KZN want the mines to close", which differs from the situation in many Mpumalanga communities. Residents of Somkhele live on communal land and their livelihoods are not tied to coal. As one informant said, "Money will always be finished but the land will never be finished." Many have deep roots in the area. All the executive committee members of the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation (MEJO) were born in the area, with one exception who arrived 50 years ago, "drawn by the fertility of the soil". However, in two separate community meetings closure of the mine

was not mentioned; most of the demands raised related to remedial action around consultation, compensation for relocation of homes and graves, damage to homes from blasting, water pollution, and the problems of dust and respectful treatment. It was frequently asserted that mine closure would not answer the needs of those demanding compensation even though "the mine authorities treat us like we don't exist". Also, because some people benefit from the mine, "if the mine closed people will fight. There will be blood all over the place." One response to this speaker was, "We could not have attained our freedom if blood was not spilled, so if blood must be spilled to close the mine, so be it." At the same meetings, pride was expressed that the community had prevented the establishment of a new mine at Fuleni. This success is attributed to the community being united and to support from a range of environmental justice NGOs. "There were no differences in the community... everyone considered those of us who had stock and who have lived in this area all our lives."

Several informants emphasised how mining corporations damage social cohesion in the community, and frequently issue false promises. Speaking of Somkhele, an informant said, "They look for fault lines in the community and then fill them with money and shatter the unity of the community... promises were made to the locals for jobs and contracts, promises which created tension and conflicts... They said mining would drive development, many people would pour into the area and there would be building jobs and taxis" (key informant interview, Pietermaritzburg 8.6.2018). Most of those who received financial compensation for the loss of their homes felt the amounts were unjust, especially as the holding company of the subsidiary operating the mine in Somkhele, Petmin, reported profits of R217-million (2014/15), R230-million (2015/16) and an increase of 7% in the share price (Young, 2018:3).

Mining corporations are increasingly using the law with threats of defamation suits to intimidate activists and silence criticism. Somkhele illustrates how environmental activists and their lawyers opposed to mining in ecologically sensitive areas are being subjected to 'lawfare' by lawyers for mining companies. For example, Tendele Coal Mining sent a legal ultimatum to the Global Environmental Trust (GET) giving it barely 24 hours to withdraw allegedly defamatory comments about the company's mining operations on community-owned land on the borders of the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.

In areas where the chiefs control natural resources, threats and intimidation of anti-coal activists is increasing. One informant said, "Organising in Somkhele and Fuleni is difficult because people are afraid of the chiefs. They fear for their lives. Even pickets and marches are becoming dangerous." A young Zulu woman at a workshop stressed the power of the chief and his indunas to allocate land and impose fines. She attended a public meeting in Fuleni, organised by the mining corporation: "The mining

man told us that the traditional council gave them the authority to mine but no one ever came to my house and asked my permission.” After the meeting, an induna (local councillor) visited her home and said, “I don’t like what you are saying. If you continue to say that mining might be bad, you and your family will be banned from this village and you will have to pay a fine (interview with workshop participant, Muldersdrift July 2018). Asked why she never reported this to the police, she commented, “No, you can’t go to the police station. You have to deal with it in a traditional, cultural way.” Another Zulu informant commented, “With their powerful traditional authority, the chiefs rely on fear and intimidation to maintain power and control.”

In Somkhele, mine management instigated violence indirectly through linking resistance to job losses and bonus payments. In 2016, Bongani Pearce’s car was set alight the night after a community march he organised. This represents a form of domination which could generate submission and acquiescence. But one woman leader in Makhasaneni said, “We are not scared of dying, we even sleep with doors unlocked. If they kill us it will be known that we died fighting the mine” (cited by Yeni 2018:16).

The support of coal mining by local authorities generally – not only in KZN – is another major obstacle to resistance. For example, in justifying his decision to grant approval for coal mining to Atha-Africa Ventures in the Mabola Protected Environment, a government official maintained that the severely impoverished local communities ‘would benefit directly both socially and economically from the mine’ (cited in *The Saturday Star* 2.12.2017). However, the residents of MACs are not passive victims of these processes. A challenge is to connect struggles across different spaces to create ‘counter-power’.



Somkhele resident and anti-mining activist, Bongani Pearce. Photo: Jacklyn Cock

## Building counter-power

This refers to the “collective work that rural and urban communities establish to defend themselves from superior powers that jeopardise their survival” (Zibechi, 2017:8). It involves using different types of power: structural, associational, social and institutional to disrupt the dominant social order (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018). Coal MACs, frequently working with environmental justice organisations, are drawing on these different forms of power in a wide range of repertoires of contention such as road blocks, demonstrations, protest marches and picketing. These often involve symbolic or societal power that goes beyond the workplace to appeal to a wider public. The social forces organised (to some extent) in the environmental justice movement often use social media with a strong normative appeal and draw on institutional power to make policy interventions. New grassroots organisations are drawing on associational power – meaning organizing to increase numbers, build social networks, formal or informal alliances and a collective identity through an emphasis on shared everyday experiences. Judicial activism is also using institutional power as a source of agency, appealing to human rights, labour laws and procedures such as environmental impact assessments and the constitutional right to a safe and healthy environment.

Five specific features could be harbingers of this counter-power developing in mining affected communities.

### (i) New grassroots organisations and alliances in frontline communities

Many new grassroots organisations are emerging, and taking the form of self-organising, horizontal networks of ‘coalition power’. They do not all follow the traditional forms of Taylorist organisation, which are hierarchical with leaders separated from their bases. For example, the Highveld Environmental Justice Network (HEJN) was formed with the help of groundWork, a non-profit environmental justice organisation, in 2011. Promise Mabilo from the Witbank township Kwa-Guga belongs to the HEJN through her organisation, the Vukani Environmental Movement, which meets weekly and has ‘many issues to address’. Promise is the director of programmes: “We plan and share ideas...groundWork feeds us with information... The learning process is what makes us activists... we try to educate people about waste and recycling... some women have food gardens growing spinach and carrots... we engage with the municipality. We teach people about climate change but they only know the basics and campaigns on climate change are not that easy... people are more interested in the immediate impacts” (interview with Promise Mabilo, Witbank 8.6.2018). Protest actions have focused on the impacts of coal mining on health and the damage to homes from blasting.

The Greater Phola Women’s Forum was formed after the

2018 municipal building was burned down in a protest action led by a male-dominated organisation. Consisting of about 40 members, it meets weekly and focuses on energy and food “because these are women’s issues”. They operate two agro-ecological projects and are in consultation with the local municipality and provincial authorities about establishing a renewable energy project. According to one leading member, “We want to bring about change through our pickets and marches... what worries us most is our exclusion...that we are excluded from decision making, especially by the municipality. They don’t consult us; women are sidelined. ...This place is very patriarchal; there have been threats to burn my house... We are advocating for women who can’t speak outright against coal” (interview with Yvonne Sampear. Vosman, 23.5.2019). Community workshops including the above two groups expressed the need for more information about climate change and expressed dismay about their lack of knowledge of planned mine closures. Some blamed the trade unions: “They have the knowledge but they don’t share with us.” Mine closures were explained simply as, “there is no more coal in the ground”, with “no awareness of climate change in our community.” At several community workshops, no mention was made of reducing carbon emissions.

This organisation is supported by WoMin and another loose network that is a more established grassroots organisation, Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA), which has 25 affiliated community organisations as members and claims to be connected to about 150 others (interview with Matthews Hlabane, Witbank, 21.6.2018). It practices ‘rightful resistance’, “a form of political practice which revolves around a rationality which seeks to hold state and project authorities accountable to laws and provisions...” (Nilsen, 2010:42).

Throughout the last 5 years, MACUA and its women’s wing, Women Affected by Mining United in Action (WAMUA), have followed a wide repertoire of contention having engaged communities across the country in protest actions. MACUA has led marches, pickets and road blockades as well as organising community capacity building workshops and dialogues, hosting educational tours, regularly attending the alternative mining indaba, and has made policy submissions to various government departments and legislative processes.

In KZN, Somkhele demonstrates growing organised resistance in the formation of the Mpukonyoni Community Environmental Justice Organisation (MCEJO) which is part of a broader alliance that has been active in organising a number of protest actions, including demonstrating outside the Pietermaritzburg High Court on the Tendele Coal Mining hearing in August 2018. The chairperson maintains that “resistance means we are demanding what is rightfully ours” (interview with Phila Ndimande, Somkhele, 5.6.2019). It is “raising awareness about mining” and co-operating with other

environmental justice organisations such as the GET and WoMin and has a shared executive with the Mpukonyoni Property Community Association, which “is concentrating on teaching people about the constitution and how it protects us. This thing of human right is new... we haven’t started about climate change yet” (interview with Bongani Pearce, Somkhele 4.6.2019).

These organisations are vibrant, though perhaps unsustainable forces. They represent a form of ‘solidaristic individualism’ which links self interest to a concern with justice and equality (Therborn, 2013:162). In doing so, grassroots activists from fenceline communities benefit from contact with environmental justice organisations that could be described as ‘catalysts’.

## (ii) Catalytic work in MACs by environmental justice organisations

In many communities, environmental justice activists act as catalysts of resistance through partnerships which involve informing and mobilising. The process is similar to Nilsen’s account of resistance to the Narmada Dam and building “an infrastructure of contention” (Nilsen, 2016:76). Nilsen describes how activists catalysed resistance by convincing villagers that it was a viable alternative to acquiescence and deference, and by developing local skills, knowledge and confidence to challenge state authorities and mining officials which “destabilized local power relations” (Nielsen, 2016:14). In the South African context, acquiring knowledge of citizenship rights and constitutional protections are empowering, as is connecting local awareness of loss and destruction from coal to the larger issues of environmental justice.

The eco-feminist, anti-extractivist organisation WoMin has called for ‘a gender just transition’ because “the current energy system is unequal and unjust, leads to energy poverty and has to change”. WoMin organises exchange visits which promote solidarity and is committed to participatory action research, which enables “women to carry out social investigations into their own issues and articulate the problems from their own perspectives” (WoMin, 2017). For example, after a participatory action study of water, “we were more confident we were able to sit down with the municipality and talk about the problems” (interview with WoMin official, Caroline Ntopane, Muldersdrift 13.7.2018). WoMin runs annual feminist schools throughout the African continent that are organised in different ways. For example, at a week-long camp of 80 women from MACs at Ogies, “there were women of all ages from mines all over the country and we learned about things like climate change and renewable energy”. The camp meant women cooking their own food, sharing limited water and sleeping on the floor of a local church; “people are so poor in this area, we wanted to organize differently which didn’t involve staying in expensive hotels... instead we were practicing simplicity and sharing” (interview Caroline Ntopane WoMin organizer. Muldersdrift 14.7.2018).



In 2018, the Global Environmental Trust, Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation and Somkhele community members applied to the Pietermaritzburg High Court for a halt on coal mining on the boundary with Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. The court dismissed the application with costs. Photo: Rob Symons

These connections between MACs and environmental justice organisations are facilitated by a process of 'bridge building' which involves several annual schools providing training in environmental justice theories, monitoring and research methods. Solidarity from organisations such as Earthlife Africa, groundWork, Action Aid, Benchmarks and WoMin has extended support and organisational networks. Most of these organisations are represented in regular 'Push Back Coal' workshops, organised by groundWork, which are structured as a process of horizontal collective learning for a sharing of knowledge by grassroot activists, researchers and policy analysts.

### (iii) Gendered agency

Women are a decisive presence in all these struggles. They are the 'shock absorbers', having to work harder to perform all the tasks of social reproduction, such as obtaining clean water, grow food on degraded land and caring for those ill from exposure to toxic pollution (Cock, 2016). This unpaid care work involves intense levels of anxiety and overburdening. As a woman from one rural community said, "We are the rock, we have to deal with everything" (participant at Community workshop, Somkhele 8.6.2018). 'Everything' often includes political agency so that women form the majority of people resisting coal and many are leaders. In a somewhat essentialising approach, Zibechi maintains that their importance goes beyond the quantitative: "Women's presence introduces another rationality, another culture, a way of thinking about life differently... in which relationships (and not things), play a central role..." (Zibechi 2012:261).

### (iv) A valorisation of nature, particularly land

In KZN it seems that resistance is not ambivalent, particularly in response to the threat of dispossession through the expansion of coal mining (see Skosana forthcoming). In these communities there are deep attachments to land and homes which represent identity, memory and connection to the ancestors, as well as livelihoods. Land is seen as more than a means of production

This is sometimes expressed in a rejection of the values of the market. A Somkhele resident said, "We are attached to the land and to our neighbours. With land you can do everything with money you can do nothing... the loss of our land and price of removal cannot be expressed in money" (interview with Bongani Pearce, Somkhele 9.6.2018). Mpondler Dladla, who lost his home, grazing land for 12 cattle and goats, and was forced to relocate to Utrecht, said, "I don't believe in money, I believe in my livestock... I want to live the same life I was living before the mine" (interview with Mr Dladla, Matubatuba 10.6.2018).

**(v) Judicial activism: Strategic litigation as a resistance strategy**

The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) is specifically dedicated to advancing environmental justice through court action to hold corporate and state authorities accountable for water and air pollution, and helping communities realise their constitutional right to a healthy environment. This involves 'rightful resistance' which challenges the abuse of power by the powerful. As a CER worker claimed, "In the short run we simply delay but in the long run we educate people." On behalf of Earthlife Africa they successfully challenged the construction of the new coal-fired power station Thabametsi on the grounds that no environmental impact assessment of the climate change impacts had been undertaken. Currently on behalf of groundWork, they are challenging the environmental minister's doubling the amount of toxic sulphur oxide that industry can pump into the air from coal boilers, and obtained a court order prohibiting coal mining by Atha-Africa in the Mabola Protected Area. (This provoked a march of around 50 youths, led by an employee of the mine from Volksrus, who protested at the CER offices in Johannesburg on the grounds that the organisation was blocking their job opportunities).

Another example is the launch of an appeal by the Legal Resources Centre on behalf of the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA) against the renewal of the licence of the Sasol plant in Secunda, the world's largest single point emitter of greenhouse gases. This judicial activism goes way beyond an emphasis on narrow constitutional rights which could depoliticise issues and displace mass mobilisation. The CER, for instance, emphasises community empowerment and providing support for victimised activists.



**(vi) New tactics, which draw on social power**

These are aimed at obtaining the support of a wider community, such as promoting 'the right to say no to mining' and have a strong normative appeal with a stress on justice. Tactics involve the extensive use of cell phones and social media – such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp – and different web sites and newsletters. The [Save our iMfolozi Wilderness](#) website that is maintained by the Global Environmental Trust is especially effective, with articles being constantly republished by other sources.

These six overlapping features are evident in a pattern of increasing resistance to different aspects of coal mining and burning that is scattered, uneven and ambivalent. But generating counter- power involves connecting different struggles. The issue of **livelihoods**, which is the immediate need of poor communities, is a potential bridge. The success of the 15-year long struggle against titanium mining at Xolobeni is partly due to the shared understanding that mining threatened the subsistence agriculture on which the community depends. As the current leader of the Amadiba Crisis Committee said, "... what holds us together is the land" (interview Nonhle Mbuthuma, 24.8.2018). The same sentiment was expressed by an activist in KZN in relation to the opposition to a new coal mine in Fuleni (see Skosana forthcoming). A focus on livelihoods links production and social reproduction and de-centres wage labour (Menon and Sundar, 2019). This is important as the numbers employed in wage labour is decreasing and life is becoming increasingly precarious with accelerating climate change. It could draw poor communities into the debate on a just transition as well as propelling labour and environmental justice movements together in a shared understanding of the 'climate change–mine closures–just transition nexus'. It could also shift the concept of a just transition to go beyond jobs and energy and include issues such as land reform and food sovereignty in a new political imaginary of transformation. In many of these MACs, the notion of a 'just transition' is simply declarative, empty of substantive content with no relation to everyday life. Residents – especially in Mpumalanga – find it difficult to imagine a just transition to a world without coal.

*Aerial photos taken on a flight east of Johannesburg and flying south over Ogies and Kriel, Hendrina to Arnot and Middelburg, and eMalahleni. The devastating effects of coal-fired power, fed by vast opencast coal mines that decimate water resources, biodiversity and productive agricultural land is self-evident. Photos: CER*

## Visions of a world without coal: elements of a just transition

However, some Somkhele villagers did know another world, a life attached to and anchored in the land before Tendele mine was placed in the middle of their strong cohesive community. Bongani Pearce has a vision of a just transition which goes back to this attachment and argued for another lifeworld where money is not the sole source of value. He speaks passionately about a return to a community living in dense, co-operative social relations and emphasised the social dislocation and dissension caused by the mine. A just transition from coal means “no drought, going back to rural living, farming with clean water, having access to clean, reliable and affordable energy, schools, clinics, jobs and unity in the community” (interview Somkhele, 9.6.2018).

In the very different context of the Mpumalanga Highveld, the founder of MACUA, Matthews Hlabane, also expresses a positive vision of a just transition: “The just transition will set you free from exploitation; you will live a healthy life, you will be helping people.” In an interview he emphasised the importance of shifting the debate from jobs to viable, alternative livelihoods: “We need to show people that you can have life without coal, that you can have electricity without coal... But for us to talk about a just transition is not enough; we have to demonstrate it... we must demonstrate how ex-miners could live in co-operatives with a socially owned, renewable energy plant... We could champion the future.” He believes strongly in demonstrating rather than talking about the just transition because “at present the debates on a just transition are not connected to our experience and our struggle”. There are elements of de-commodification in his vision: “The system makes people believe that money is king... the capitalist system makes people think that they cannot survive without money.” (interview Witbank, 21.6.2018). Matthews also emphasises the land. “The colonial system disconnected people from land. If you are disconnected you lose your love for the land. We have to reconnect people to the land. It will benefit everyone.”

However, these expressions of an alternative political imaginary are unusual. A groundWork organiser stressed “the problem is that all discussion of a just transition quickly turn to jobs, but a just transition is about more than jobs – it should also involve food security and changes of attitude... we need extensive engagement, consultation and debate on how to move away from coal... the emphasis must be on building strong grassroots activism” (interview, Middelburg 21.6.2018). Local communities are focused on problems in their immediate, lived experience. As another environmental justice organiser commented, “I focus on the cost, not the cause, of issues that people can identify with... Health and air quality are my main mobilising issues. People protest about electricity but they don’t ask why electricity is expensive. It is difficult because people want overnight solutions. Protesters focus on the municipality, the immediate, visible source of power, not Eskom which seems too remote” (interview, Middelburg. 21.6.2018).

The dominant view connects coal to economic development. As one informant commented, “The people think coal mining means job opportunities. Where there is coal there is money” (key informant interview, Witbank 8.6.2018). At the same time, for many, a mine is seen as part of the infrastructure of domination and exclusion which has continued in post-apartheid South Africa. Many members of those communities are deeply angry and feel their interests are ignored and their voices unheard. As one informant expressed it, “the workers have their trade unions but we have no one to speak for us” (participant at 15.4.2019 workshop, Phola). But with support from a diverse range of environmental justice organisations these communities are beginning to mobilise associational power in loosely structured grassroots networks and alliances as well as tapping into new sources of societal and institutional power. A major weakness is the minimal part that labour has played in these struggles.

*People living next to the mines in Emalahleni suffer high rates of chronic illnesses from sinus problems, asthma to TB. Community clinics are few and lack medication and the only TB hospital is in a polluted area near steel and vanadium factories. Mine trucks also raise dust as the mine roads are gravel.*  
Photo: Susan Moraba





## 5. Resistance to coal in the environmental justice movement

All the initiatives described above illustrate the strategic importance of environmental justice activists working in partnership with local communities. The work of the GET in Somkhele, together with the Mpukonyoni Environmental Justice Organisation, mobilises social power as part of a Save our iMfolozi Wilderness Alliance that came together to meet the threat of a new coal mine to be built at Fulani at the edge of the iMfolozi Reserve. The reserve was established in 1879 and is the oldest nature reserve in South Africa and has the largest concentration of Southern White Rhino in the world. Some one thousand people were removed when the park was fenced, including the grandfather of resistance leader, Bongani Pearce (interview with Sheila Berry, Pietermaritzburg, 10.6.2018).

It has been asserted that ‘there is no clearly identifiable, relatively unified and broadly popular environmental movement’ in South Africa (Death, 2014:1216). Certainly, there is no master frame encoded in any blueprint and no co-ordinated, coherent centre or tidy margins, but there are growing, multiple and diverse initiatives, some of which are promoting counter-power directly or indirectly (Cock, 2018). One of the most important initiatives is the emergence of new alliances as well as co-operation between a range of social and environmental justice organisations. These could be conceptualised as a form of ‘social movement community’ (Runciman, 2012:166). That they are forming alliances and articulating a generic critique of coal is key to building a coherent, united social movement. In this regard, ‘Life Beyond Coal’, an alliance composed of groundWork, Earthlife Africa and the CER is playing a crucial part. Their goal is to “discourage new coal plants and mines, reduce emissions from existing coal infrastructure and enable a just transition to renewable energy for the people”. Working together, the three organisations do invaluable work in grassroots organising in MACs, in court actions against the violation of environmental regulations and standards, in policy interventions, and in providing accessible information in annual reports based on meticulous research. This co-operation is part of transnational advocacy networks as evidenced in the locally grounded campaign led by groundWork against the World Bank funding of coal-fired power stations, which mobilised more than 200 organisations globally.

Both groundWork – founded 20 years ago and representing the Friends of the Earth – and Earthlife, founded in 1988, reach up into policy arenas and down into grassroots anti-coal work. Earthlife is promoting concrete post-carbon alternatives such as their Sustainable Energy and Livelihoods Project, which combines water harvesting, food sovereignty and clean energy, through installing,

maintaining and training women on the use of agro-ecology, biogas digesters and PVC solar power units. One of the projects in KwaTemba, Durban, is run at a local primary school and obtains all its electricity needs from solar power, supplements the inadequate, government school feeding scheme with its own vegetables, and the cooking is done by volunteer women.

Other organisations are mobilising around new narratives of food sovereignty, energy democracy, eco-feminism, socially-owned renewable energy, zero waste, carbon justice, agro-ecology and an understanding of nature as more than a source of raw materials for economic activity or a sink for waste products. All are building blocks for an alternative development path. Greenpeace and 350Africa.org are drawing on social power, as does the divestment campaign to persuade universities and churches to divest their fossil fuel shares. Similarly, newly founded ‘Just Shares’ is targeting corporations and banks to ‘choke’ funding for fossil fuels.

A major obstacle to an alliance between ‘red’ and ‘green’ social forces to drive a just transition is the conventional binary which poses the issue as a choice between protecting jobs or the environment. Eroding this, a Climate Jobs Campaign has listed over one million new, alternative ‘climate jobs’, meaning ‘those that help to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases and build the resilience of communities to withstand the impact of climate change (Ashley, 2018:27). Examples include developing renewable energy plants, public transport and small-scale organic agriculture.

Intensifying climate change, and economic factors, such as falling prices of solar and wind power, will accelerate the transition from coal. But achieving justice depends on a closer connection between progressive social forces. It is clear from the above that environmental justice activists as catalysts and partners are doing a great deal to promote the climate change–mine closures–just transition nexus. A worrying aspect is the absence of labour.

## 6. Resistance to coal and the labour movement

Beginning in 2010, the labour movement in South Africa played a key role in introducing and promoting a transformative understanding of a 'just transition' from fossil fuels. However, in the past few years the movement has retreated into a defensive position focused on protecting existing jobs. It has been suggested that because coal is a sunset industry, such a strategy is 'misleading'. According to another informant, "Only the labour movement has the infrastructure and the capacity to drive a just transition from below" (Hameeda Deedat interview, 2.11.2018). A crucial question is whether drawing from four power resources (structural, associational, institutional and societal), and through forging closer connections with two other social forces – the environmental movement and increasing opposition to coal in MACs – labour could reclaim the concept. Despite having become increasingly fragmented, with the key union organising coal workers having lost much of its power, labour has the potential to drive a transformative, just transition (Chinguno, 2013: Satgar and Southall, 2015).

### The National Union of Mineworkers

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), formerly South Africa's largest trade union, is key to achieving a just transition, but is struggling with a loss of credibility and support. NUM's membership has dropped to 187,000, losing members to retrenchment and to rival, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). In numerous interactions, NUM officials have supported the expansion of coal mining, protested job losses from mine closures, promoted controversial 'clean coal' technologies, such as Carbon Capture and Storage, and even opposed the closure of old coal-fired power stations on the grounds that they "can be rebuilt to extend their lives" (NUM President, 19.6.2019). On at least one occasion, a NUM spokesman opposed the notion of a just transition on the grounds that it is a 'northern notion' and inappropriate as "coal is part of our African culture." Labour has played a minimal part in local anti-coal initiatives, and NUM is often described as 'promising' and 'uncaring about the people".

A lack of preparation for the changes involved in a just transition is in strong contrast to the 1987 NUM strike which led to 40,000 workers losing their jobs. On that occasion, the NUM set up a job creating programme to establish co-operatives and a Mobile Job Creation Unit with a twenty ton truck that delivered training to mineworkers during the retrenchment processes that followed the strike. The union organised contact groups for the miners facing retrenchment and they discussed future livelihood strategies and how they would invest their retrenchment packages (Philip, 2018).

Another trade union has played an important role in addressing a key element of a just transition – renewable energy. Since the inception of the Independent Power Producers Renewable Energy Programme, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the single biggest trade union in the country with more than 338,000 members, has been critical of the private sector driven approach and has argued forcefully for the social ownership of renewable energy as part of developing "a revolutionary and class approach to climate change" (NUMSA press statement, 19.8.2011). In 2011 it also established a worker Research and Development Group on renewable energies, and energy efficiency.

Recently, 'red-green' tensions have surfaced. The labour movement is increasingly defensive and adamant that the state's privatised renewable energy policy is a threat because it will involve job losses and increased energy prices, while the environmental movement is increasingly adamant about the immediate closure of coal mines and coal-fired power stations and a shift to renewable energy (in whatever form) as essential to a just transition.

The trigger for these tensions was NUMSA's 2018 court interdict to block Eskom from signing renewable energy contracts with 27 independent power producers. NUMSA argued that the contracts would be detrimental to the working class, because electricity prices would rise and jobs lost. Different groupings in the environmental movement reacted very differently to the court interdict, variously emphasising the costs of Medupi and Kusile and the environmental and health impacts of Eskom's coal-fired power stations. There was no unanimous agreement that a deep, just transition requires changes not only in the sources of energy, but also in who owns and controls various components of the energy system.

Some comments from individuals were hostile and accusatory. Greenpeace said the move by NUMSA "was clearly meant to sabotage renewable energy in favour of coal" (cited in *Development*, 13.3.2018). An editorial in *Business Day* referred to NUMSA's court action as "an attempt to suppress the growth of renewable energy generation" and "short sighted and futile" (14.3.2018). Irwin Jim accused environmentalists of "prioritising weather and frogs over the interests of the working class" (Facebook post, 18.3.2018).

Overall, there is a serious disconnect regarding the role of labour at the national and local levels. An environmental justice activist who works with NUMSA but has not been able to engage NUM, stressed that "there is a big gap between NUMSA at the national and local levels... Most NUMSA officials at the local level know nothing about a just transition or about socially owned energy" (key informant interview, Middelburg, 10.6.2018).

Another environmental justice activist working with MACs recently met with NUMSA in Middelburg but "I felt they were trying to intimidate me. They said the job losses from the closure of coal mines was because

we insist on environmental compliance” (interview, Middelburg, 13.2.2019). According to Matthews Hlabane, affiliates of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) understand the just transition but they also have reservations because it has not been demonstrated: “If we just theorise we are bound to fail” (interview, Witbank, 21.6.2018). Several informants complained that “NUM is not helping us”. The same informant commented that “there is nothing nice about a coal mine. When you go into the mine you are going to die. You are digging your death.”

Despite extensive debate between urban based intellectuals in the labour movement, generally today there is no expression of a coherent vision of a world without coal, or of a world without full employment in wage labour or of the catastrophic implications of accelerating climate change, or a shared understanding of a just transition. This emerged clearly at the March 2018 ‘National Labour Climate Change Conference’ convened by the National Labour and Economic Development Institute (Naledi) and attended by representatives of three labour federations – COSATU, FEDUSA and NACTU.

Nevertheless, labour has the structural power to advance the interests of workers and people living near coal mines and coal-fired power stations. They are the people who have benefited the least and been burdened the most in building South Africa’s carbon-intense economy. Labour could mobilise associational power much more through trade union organisations, as well as structural and logistical power with the ability to cause disruption through strikes, go-slows, sabotage and road blocks, and institutional power from the labour regime and structures such as Nedlac. It could mobilise all these forms of power to demand retraining and reskilling for coal workers retrenched during mine closures and promote regional developmental initiatives.

There are some hopeful signs. For example, representatives from NUM and NUMSA are co-operating on a project to restructure Eskom as a socially owned entity which drives renewable energy. NUM has urged government to extend its focus beyond the introduction of new power generating technologies and to pay greater attention to the reskilling of the current Eskom workers. This is “so they can be absorbed into the envisaged clean-energy technology, if indeed it is going to create more jobs as they claim” (NUM NEC statement, 30.4.2019). At a recent ‘Coal exchange’ of anti-coal activists from all over the country, organised by groundWork, representatives of both NUM and NUMSA attended and expressed a willingness to co-operate, on the grounds that workers are also exposed to pollution as much as MACs. However, they stressed the need for concrete alternatives. The South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), whose affiliates include NUMSA and other unions that split from the ANC-aligned COSATU, has been particularly inclusive in its approach and “is in favour of a ‘just transition’... in a way that protects the livelihoods of mining and energy

workers and the lives of communities most affected by environmental pollution” (SAFTU statement, 2.6.2018).

## 7. Conclusion: looking to the future

“We are entering the declining decades of the fossil fuel era, a brief episode of human time” (Mitchell 2013:231). It is a time when the concept of a just transition could be at the heart of a powerful narrative of hope, justice, sustainability and radical change.

Using a broad concept of resistance, this paper has considered anti-coal initiatives emerging from three different social spaces: mining affected communities, environmental organisations and labour. In each case there are different priorities of resistance: job losses for the labour movement, dispossession of land and livelihoods for rural communities, and extractivism for the environmental justice movement. However, these priorities are the subjects of intense contestation. This paper suggests that, despite heavy obstacles, anti-coal initiatives have the potential to build a ‘counter-power’ which challenges inequality, and is potentially infused by visions of another world beyond coal. This could, with deeper connections between organised labour, mining affected communities and environmental justice organisations, cohere into a vision of a ‘just transition’ that is transformative.

Coal workers and those living near coal mines and coal-fired power stations have benefited the least and been burdened the most in building South Africa’s carbon-intense economy. As Neva Makgetla has warned, “We must ensure powerful interests do not push the cost of transition onto the workers and communities” (interview, Johannesburg, 16.6.2018). Unless labour reclaims its power, the case of South Africa could demonstrate what an ‘unjust transition’ looks like.

## Appendix: The research approach

This paper is the product of a collaborative process involving Victor Munnik, Dineo Skosana and myself. The aim was on empowering community members with the information and confidence to formulate demands and participate in the struggle to ensure that the transition from coal is just and transformative. The field work in mining affected communities was done by all three of us with a division of labour regarding analysis and writing. The fieldwork sought to replace what Mazibuko Jara has termed 'extractivist' research methods with co-operative processes involving community members meaningfully at every stage. This involves the co-production of knowledge and is in tune with decolonial and feminist approaches to research which emphasise reflexivity, dialogic learning, valuing lived experience, sharing, and reciprocity (Otto and Terhorst, 2011). Besides a literature review, key informant interviews and a scoping exercise conducted by three trained community researchers who interviewed informal traders and coal workers, the research relied on 'exchange workshops' in four different research sites.

This revealed a complicated and untidy picture with various kinds of oppositional agency expressed in different forms of protest and defiance in relation to coal. Most of our informants were women, long-standing local residents and socially engaged in their communities. All were marked by different degrees of precarity, meaning a vulnerability linked to unemployment, and a lack of access to public goods and adequate social protection.

One of our research sites was Somkhele, a grouping of some 4,000 residents of 10 villages in KwaZulu-Natal between Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park and Mtubatuba (see Skosana forthcoming). They began their battle with Tendele when it started mining in the area in 2004. Over the years, the mine has expanded and currently operates over a vast area affecting thousands of people. The residents, who had lived there for generations, lost the land on which they depended for grazing their livestock and growing food. It involved massive social and ecological disruption.

The other three research sites – Phola, Vosman, and Arbor – are situated near Emalahleni (meaning 'the place of coal') which has been described as one of the most polluted places in the world. All are surrounded by coal plants and are spaces of displacement, deprivation and exclusion. Many of the inhabitants are migrants from other parts of the country who – unlike Somkhele – lack deep attachments to the land. In Vosman, an open-cast mine is close to people's houses. Promise Mabilo maintains that, "We are living in hell here ...it is not a happy place, with infrequent refuse removal, irregular supplies of water so people rely on streams which are already contaminated with sewage and the air is dirty. We have electricity but

it is too expensive... we cook with paraffin and coal... There are no jobs... people rely on the government grants and borrow money a lot. The miners are all from outside, local people fail the induction tests" (interview, Vosman, 8.6.2018). By contrast, an informant from Arbor which is also surrounded by coal plants described it as a 'good place' despite a lack of basic services. "We look after each other like a family" (key informant interview, Arbor, 1 9.11 2018). According to Yvonne Sampear from the Greater Phola Women's Forum, Phola township is a highly politicised place known for community protests, often about the failure of the mines to employ local people, as well as issues such as the relocation of over 1,000 graves by Glencore for their open cast mine.

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