

South Africa's polluting giants

It's about profits and class

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When it comes to greenhouse gas emissions, South Africa falls within the 15 biggest polluters in the world. But there is also a class dimension when it comes to pinning down which sections of society are responsible for air pollution – the major polluters in South Africa are the ruling class (capitalists, politicians and top state bureaucrats) and their state and corporations (including state corporations), continuing an economy based on cheap black labour, mining and externalising costs. State-backed “empowerment” firms – for Afrikaners from 1948, and blacks from 1994 – are deeply involved.

- In 2015 alone, South Africa emitted 427 million metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂)
- As such, South Africa as a country is a major contributor to global warming – although it is not quite in the league of China, the USA and India
- Air pollution in some parts of South Africa, such as the Mpumalanga Highveld, is so bad that millions of people suffer from diseases caused by air pollution, including skin rashes, heart disease, asthma and lung cancer
- In fact, it is estimated that between 2 200 and 2 700 people in South Africa die prematurely every year as a result of being exposed to high levels of air pollution
- But there is also a class dimension when it comes to pinning down which sections of society are responsible for air pollution – not all people contribute equally to air pollution
- When pollution is looked at in conjunction with class, it becomes very clear who the major polluters in South Africa are; and it is not the working class

The polluting class

- The reality is that the ruling class (capitalists, politicians and top state bureaucrats) and their state and corporations are responsible for the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions – including CO₂ emissions – in South Africa
- The biggest 80 companies operating in South Africa account for over 60% of all air pollution

Two of the biggest polluters amongst these companies are [state-owned] Eskom and [privatised] Sasol

- Sasol’s Secunda plant, which is a coal-to-fuel plant, is the largest single emitter of CO₂ in the world. Sasol as a group emits over 60 million metric tons of CO₂ per year.

Eskom, however, is by far the biggest polluter in the country

- 90% of the electricity Eskom generates comes from coal and in particular lowgrade coal that creates heavy pollution when burned
- Eskom emits well over 200 million metric tons of CO₂ a year

- Over 77% of the electricity generated by Eskom through low-grade coal is used by mining, commerce, manufacturing and agricultural enterprises – with less than 20% being consumed by domestic/residential users

But it is not just CO₂ that is emitted by the likes of Sasol and Eskom – other poisonous gasses, including sulphur dioxide, hydrogen sulphide and mercury are pumped out by these companies

Profits and pollution

- Under capitalism and the market system major polluters like Eskom and Sasol externalise the costs of pollution by dumping it into the air
- Therefore, because they don't have to pay for the pollution they make, Eskom and Sasol's profits are subsidised and the costs of pollution – including bad health – are externalised onto people
- Having the ability to dump pollution and externalise any costs also means that companies like Sasol and Eskom don't have any incentive to use cleaner energy
- So it pays companies to pollute and pollution and profits are very directly connected

Pollution and the structure of the South African economy

- The major defining features of South African capitalism, and what has made manufacturing and especially mining traditionally so profitable, are cheap labour and extremely cheap electricity
- Colonialism and apartheid were tied to capitalism and, through oppression and racism, a black working class was created as a source of very cheap labour, and hence high profit, for capitalists (the tiny group of people that own the means of production) in South Africa

But cheap electricity also played a huge role in ensuring the profitability of South African capitalism

- In fact, the state nationalised private electricity companies – such as the Victoria Falls Power Company – in 1948 in order to provide giant companies, including Anglo American, with the cheapest electricity in the world
- To do so Eskom has used low-grade coal, often supplied to it by the very companies receiving cheap and even subsidised electricity, such as Anglo American, because it was the cheapest way to produce electricity
- Thus capitalism in South Africa and the use of low-grade heavily polluting coal to generate the cheapest possible electricity have been and are tied together

If air pollution is to be addressed in South Africa, therefore, the structure of the economy will also have to be changed, as it is the structure of capitalism in the country that drives the use of cheap low-grade coal – and hence massive air pollution – by companies like Sasol, Eskom and ArcelorMittal

Empowerment has a long dirty history

- Eskom has not only used low-grade polluting coal as its main source of electricity to benefit giant companies at the expense of the working class and its health; it also has a long history of promoting aspirant sections of the ruling class through ‘empowerment’ and their link to low-grade coal

During apartheid, Eskom was used as a means of Afrikaner economic empowerment

- Most of the low-grade coal mines were owned by Afrikaner capitalists –English capital already had a monopoly over mines with better quality coal
- To assist these Afrikaner capitalists Eskom focused on building power stations that generated electricity through burning low-grade and heavily polluting coal. It favoured purchasing this low quality coal from operations, such as Gencor, owned by Afrikaner capitalists

Today and since 1994, Eskom now plays a key role in elite black economic empowerment

- Most black economic empowerment companies in the coal industry – like Afrikaner empowerment companies in the past – are concentrated around low-grade coal mines
- Eskom today supports these initiatives through purchasing low-grade coal from corporations with shares owned by a black elite, including Patrice Motsepe and Cyril Ramaphosa
- Thus the focus on low-grade coal by Eskom is also linked to a history of furthering the profits and class interests of an elite with political connections to the state

As with apartheid, it is the working class that pays the consequences

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