A world of pain for steel industry staff

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"DO YOU see me?" shouts Ernest Sigaqana to the “Renmental” hall as he lifts up his shirt to show the scars that tear through his stomach, “I’m alive but I’m walking dead.”

The hundreds of, sickly men gathered around the 71-year-old Sigaqana, murmured in agreement. They too feel like living death. “The doctor told me that I had had chemicals in my body from all the years I had spent working at Ilocor,” explains Sigaqana. “That is why I got cancer. I’m very sick, but I’m not buried yet.”

For the past 12 years Sigaqana and fellow ex-employees of the steel giant, now ArcelorMittal, have met every Wednesday and Saturday in smog-filled Sebokeng to discuss their demands for compensation. For their ailing health, they blame their years spent working at ArcelorMittal’s Vanderbijlpark plant.

In their fight they have been joined by the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (Veja), which has campaigned tirelessly for ArcelorMittal to remedy decades of water and air pollution in Vanderbijlpark and its bleak, polluted surrounds.

But despite years of shouting, no-one listened. The Department of Labour failed to respond to the plight of the former workers, says Veja, while ArcelorMittal refused to investigate claims of former workers.

That was until November last year when ArcelorMittal started a research project, contracting an independent local doctor to examine around 120 ex-employees and “investigate them for diseases most prevalent in the steel-making industry.”

These occupational conditions include nasopharyngeal cancer, chronic obstructive lung disease, pneumoconiosis (lung dust disease) and renal disease. Peteusa Malapela is also battling occupational heavy metal exposure.

But Sigaqana and his colleagues were not prepared for the results. “They came back and said no one is sick and that every one of us is lying,” he says, shaking his head in disbelief.

“How can we all be fine? But we all know the risk. We all know the doctor — that we are all suffering from the same things. But yet the doctor’s letter says we are not sick. These guys must be confused about why we’re all still alive. They shouldn’t be working here. How many workers have died without being checked all these years?”

Some 57 ex-workers “have died or have been disabled” says Malapela. Eventually they (ArcelorMittal) said that only five people have proven occupational disease and they will re-evaluate the SI workers. Then they sent us a letter saying 19 people are sick, but they haven’t explained this yet.

What we want from them is the assessment reports plus their exit medical reports, but they haven’t answered us yet. We have filed our case with the SA Health Services.

The numbers of former ArcelorMittal workers who contracted occupational diseases could be far higher. Malapela says there are around 10,000 ex-workers of Ilocor/ArcelorMittal who are “terribly sick.”

“These are workers who are suffering from the Vaal and at the Pretoria and Newcastle plants. But ArcelorMittal told us they only have funding to test 200 ex-workers. That’s because they only tested that many.”

ArcelorMittal, which describes the screening project as a “community upliftment programme”, has spent R1 million on the health assessments “to determine the possibility of any illnesses being related to time spent working at the company,” it says. “The results of these tests are at various stages of completion, while some still require further test work to be conducted. As per the required legislation, the company is bound to report any medical conditions that it believes employees or ex-employees may have contracted during their time at the company to the Compensation Commissioner, a process that needs to be followed regarding medical queries on occupational exposure.”

Dr Andre du Randt Louis is confident about his results, which included a review of the available occupational health records at ArcelorMittal’s Vanderbijlpark plant.

“All relevant tests pertaining to the occupational exposures associated with the steel manufacturing processes were conducted, and feedback was provided to each individual at the time of consultation, via the translator. I am confident that the process followed was sound for the purpose intended.”

Malapela says ArcelorMittal’s own reports have identified the toxic dangers of the chemicals it uses in its steel-making process.

“People in Vanderbijlpark, in Boksburg, in Sebokeng, suffer from the same illnesses as the workers do,” ArcelorMittal’s own scouting reports have shown how their chemicals can affect the kidneys and lungs and how some are carcinogenic.

“But it’s surprising when they assess their ex-employees who are sick that they say the workers are not suffering from the diseases they mention in their own reports.”

Aletta Mafrika knows this all too well. “My father, who worked for Ilocor for 25 years, died of pulmonary lung disease and my daughter, who lived in Sebokeng, but who never worked for Ilocor, died from the same disease. She was only 28.”

Mafrika worked as a “tea lady” for over 30 years at the former Ilocor. “One day I was just told to leave and not given anything. I’m also suffering from all kinds of pain and illnesses. I refused to be demoted and took the package they were offering. They said they would call me to check if I was still sick, but this has never happened.”

The stories of the ex-workers like Benjamin Mzimzana brings Caroline Ntontane, an air quality campaigner for Veja, to tears. Ntontane has lived in a crammed, fly-infested shack in Sebokeng for the past four years. She worked for 15 years at the then-Ilocor. “The doctor said the pollution caused my whole body.”

Still, Ntontane retains some optimism. “I have hope this will finally come true. After the people fought, finally Ilocor decided to pay them. We will see what the doctors say.”

This may come too late for 70-year-old Shoemaker Pongsanyi. His legs bear the scars of chemical burns.

“I used to molt steel for Ilocor. Today, I have TB, cancer, my finger and my lungs are damaged. I’m very sick. Even now we speak my body is worn. When I sleep I hear the sound of my heart.”

Veja’s Malapela believes more needs to be done to hold industries accountable for their poisonous workplaces.

“It’s not only Ilocor causing this sickness. We’ve got Sasol and Eskom, which also cause havoc in the area. All these companies have set aside a lot more money for their corporate social investment programmes. But I don’t know what’s being used for.”

Charity begins at home, he believes.

“If they can’t take care of their own employees, their ex-employees and their family, how can they say that they are taking care of the community?”