South African oil spill pollutes rich whites’ playground
But suburban Durban’s disaster reveals wider planetary abuse and eco-racism

By Patrick Bond

Over the holiday season, the front pages of the newspapers in Durban – South Africa’s third-largest city – screamed out again and again about a diesel spill. In the suburb of Hillcrest on December 23, a Durban-Johannesburg pipeline operated by the giant parastatal firm Transnet gushed 220 000 liters into wealthy white residents’ gardens.

The pipeline, built in 1965 and now at least four years past its official retirement date, annually carries three billion litres of petroleum products for BP, Shell and Malaysian-owned Engen. An anonymous company source confirmed to The Witness newspaper, ‘The underground pipe had burst along a weld line which had given way.’ A Transnet spokesperson confessed that the Hillcrest clean-up would take ‘close to a year.’

Look more closely at the damage and how it might have been prevented. Not only should this become a case for rethinking both our addiction to climate-destroying petroleum and the geographically-illogical Johannesburg region’s excessive air pollution – and what narratives activists might deploy against fossil-fuel facilitators like Transnet.

Those were points made back in 2008 by one of the country’s finest civil society groups, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), when they predicted this sort of incident based on experiences with multinational corporations at Africa’s largest oil refinery site. In 2001, one pipeline used by Shell and BP spilled of 1.3 million liters of oil in the South Durban Bluff neighbourhood (disclosure: this is where I live).
In addition, the mainly white Hillcrest residents’ ‘Not In My Back Yard!’ (‘NIMBY’) tradition stands exposed, as does Transnet’s solution to the unreliable old pipeline: pump more oil through a brand new pipeline traversing former KwaZulu bantustan areas and South Durban neighbourhoods inhabited by mainly low-income black people.

That 'New Multi-Products Pipeline' (NMPP) – whose piping was completed three years ago but which still awaits two new pump stations to reach full capacity – suffered huge delays and overruns, raising the cost from the initial estimate of R6.5 billion in 2006 to R23.4 billion at last count.

In September 2007, even Transnet’s oft-praised then CEO Maria Ramos had estimated the final cost at just R11.2 billion, less than half of what it would balloon to within a matter of three years after the route change through South Durban. Because different petroleum products (unleaded petrol, diesel and jet fuel) move through it, it was a complex pipe to lay out over 544 kilometers. The NMPP has been called the world’s largest pipeline of its kind.

As for timing, the new pipeline and pumping stations were meant to be completed by 2010 so the line running through Hillcrest should have been decommissioned, but April 2015 is Transnet’s latest target date. One reason for missing deadline after deadline is that dozens of kilometers were added by detouring via black residential areas.
The rerouting was done with excessive haste, resulting in an intense critique from SDCEA in 2008. Confirming SDCEA’s predictions, former Minister of Public Enterprises Malusi Gigaba conceded in parliament last April that Transnet’s management of the new pipeline project suffered ‘unsatisfactory safety performance, poor environmental compliance, insufficient quality controls, and inadequate control and supervision.’
Earlier, in December 2012 after an investigation, Gigaba had admitted that ‘Transnet Capital Projects lacked sufficient capacity and depth of experience for the client overview of a megaproject of this complexity. There was an inadequate analysis of risks. Transnet’s obligations on the project such as securing authorisations – Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), land acquisition for right of way, water and wetland permits – were not pursued with sufficient foresight and vigour.’

In 2008 when the new pipeline design was approved, Transnet’s ‘systematic failings’ (in Gigaba’s words) were overseen by Minister of Public Enterprises Alec Erwin, a man who just four years earlier won endorsement from Foreign Affairs journal (the main voice of the US imperial establishment) to become the World Trade Organisation’s director-general, and by Ramos, who a year later was named by Fortune magazine as 9th most powerful woman in the world and who now leads the country’s second largest bank (Barclays’ subsidiary Absa).

In other words, this wasn’t rank incompetence, it was systemic eco-social abuse by some of South Africa’s leading public officials. As far as I can tell, they have faced no accountability for their own systematic failings in what was then Transnet’s largest-ever project. Erwin and Ramos were amongst a single handful of managers of South Africa’s neoliberal macroeconomic transition during the Mandela-Mbeki years (he was trade minister, she was finance director-general), but the damage they did also can be felt in many local contexts, including here in KwaZulu-Natal.

Neither Erwin, Ramos or others overseeing Transnet addressed widespread collusion by construction companies during tendering by one of the main Durban-Johannesburg pipeline beneficiaries, Group Five Civil Engineering. Many Transnet projects suffered
unjustifiable 50% mark-ups thanks to the now notorious collusion. Corporate abuse of this sort affects the entire society, even the rich.

Indeed, the scene of the latest crime is Hillcrest’s Greenvale Village gated complex, built after 1965, under which the Transnet pipeline crossed in spite of servitudes dating back years. Greenvale boasts comfortable mansions, and one reason for their desirability is the proximity (within 3 kilometers) of some of Durban’s finest schools. This mink, Merc and manure belt, stretching along two highways from Assagay to Kloof, is truly a site of local ruling-class reproduction, just as much as Umhlanga, Durban North and Glenwood.

It was in places like this, SDCEA uncannily predicted in 2008, that Transnet’s carelessness would become obvious: ‘There is no emergency plan available regarding the existing pipeline so those living along its route have no way of knowing how to respond to an emergency or accident… There may be people living along the path of the existing pipeline who do not know it is there, what it may be doing to their land and water, and what to do if the aging structure bursts.’

In this bastion of smug wealth, the centre-right Democratic Alliance opposition political party is popular. Its eloquent local municipal councilor, Rick Crouch, appears aggressive in defending local interests. As he explained to The Mercury, ‘More than a year ago we addressed the issue with Transnet. They took me on an inspection in loco to show me how safe it was to have a pipeline near residential homes. I still had my doubts.’

**Transnet’s serial carelessness and overcapacity**

As well he should (though Crouch apparently kept them to himself), for Transnet was responsible for related disasters in 1998 and twice in 2013. Ramos’ celebrated endorsement of corporatisation apparently allowed managers to short-change broader social and ecological considerations. As an insider source told The Witness: ‘This is not the first time this has happened. Within close proximity to the previous rupture site, the pipe had burst [in 1998] and they were warned of operating the line at high pressure. History repeats itself.’

In 2013, the same pipeline leaked 300 000 liters on a dairy farm an hour west of Hillcrest. The incident was allegedly covered up by Transnet, but revealed the weakness of piping that was punctured by a farmworker ploughing the land. Remarked Bobby Peek, director of one of the country’s leading environmental NGOs, groundWork, ‘The fact that it took Transnet Pipelines three hours to arrest the flow of fuel from the rupture was an indictment on their ability to safely monitor their systems and act promptly in an emergency.’

In contrast, brags a government website, ‘Transnet Pipelines continually monitors the integrity of its pipeline network. Internal inspection tools, known as Intelligent Pigs, are valuable devices for this work. They make use of the magnetic stray flux principle to determine and record possible areas of metal loss from corrosion or any other cause. The results of the most recent Intelligent Pig survey of the network indicate that the pipelines, which are methodically protected against electrolytic corrosion, are in a generally good condition.’
Right then, blame pipeline rot on what must have been a litter of rather Unintelligent Pigs.

But Transnet was also indirectly responsible for a very different Hillcrest attack in September 2013. Just a dozen kilometres from Greenvale Village along the main road to Durban, a driver named Sanele May lost control of his container truck as he rolled down the very steep Fields Hill on the M13 highway. May then crashed into two kombi taxis and killed 24 working-class black people after his brakes apparently failed.

Six weeks ago, the 23 year old Swazi immigrant pleaded guilty to culpable homicide, entering South Africa illegally, being in possession of fake driver’s licences, operating a vehicle without a valid professional driving permit, and failing to comply with a road traffic sign. But the Taiwanese firm which owns the container – the world’s fourth largest shipping company, Evergreen – and Sagekal Logistics truck company which hired May and encouraged him to avoid a toll station on the N3 (because the truck’s registration was outdated) were not prosecuted, though they are to blame, in a systemic sense.

The structural problems driving the transport chaos remain unresolved, and Field’s Hill remains a site of periodic fatal truck accidents. These reflect the risks involved when, after 1994, the government and Transnet consented to shifting the six-meter long containers from railways to road. Transnet had no sensitivity to the needs of ordinary commuters in Durban, to minimal regulatory safety measures or to climate change.

A year ago, Business Day newspaper put Transnet’s climate denialism on the front page due to the parastatal’s rejected EIA for the first phase of Durban’s port expansion. In June last year, the company’s revised EIA confirmed its lack of concern for sea level rise, as its Cape Town consultants (ZAA Engineering Projects) simply misinterpreted a major United Nations climate study. Once again, SDCEA offered a devastating EIA critique.

The parastatal agency is only in the early stages of moving containers back from the road to its mainly idle rail lines. One result of such procrastination is that in 2011, 7000 truck crashes caused 70 fatalities in the Durban area alone. But since the post-apartheid trucking deregulation began, importers have built so much warehouse space and related logistics infrastructure along Durban’s main highways, that a shift back to rail will be nearly impossible under the logic of capitalist transport.

Moreover, at the South Durban port complex, Transnet’s planned R250 billion expansion of the existing harbour plus a new dig-out port at the site of the city’s old airport will, according to National Development Plan projections, raise Durban’s annual container throughput from 2.5 million in recent years to 20 million by 2040. Regardless
of whether that estimate is accurate or yet another thumb-suck fantasy, nearly all the containers will continue to be transported by truck.

In contrast, the main merit of Transnet’s new oil pipeline is that far fewer truckloads of petrol and diesel are now being transported by truck. The new pipeline more than doubles the oil-transit capacity, because it uses 24-inch diameter size piping (double the old pipeline), and has a much stronger pumping system that, with much greater pressure possible, can triple the amount the Johannesburg region – with its 12 million residents – receives per year compared to the line that burst in Hillcrest.

Ironically, though, after a 2012 peak of 6.023 billion litres carried in the combined old and new Durban-Johannesburg pipelines (an increase of 87% from 2010 levels), the amount carried last year was only 5.340 billion litres. The assumption in 2006 was that petrol consumption would follow the ‘Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa’ economic plan, which in 2005 had projected annual GDP growth of 6% for the 2010-14 period. In reality, South Africa managed annual average growth of just 2.5% over the last five years.

As a result of aligning state mega-infrastructure spending to persistently optimistic macro-economic assumptions, South Africa’s overbuilding craze was responsible for not just white elephant soccer stadiums built for the 2010 soccer World Cup (which are now draining most municipal coffers), but also massive overcapacity in new and renovated airports, the R25 billion Gautrain Johannesburg-Pretoria fast train (with just half the ridership anticipated), and also that region’s hated e-tolled highway.

**Oil flowing from Durban to Johannesburg, 2008-14**

![Graph showing oil flow from Durban to Johannesburg, 2008-14](Source: Transnet 2014 tariff application to the National Energy Regulator of SA)
Moving from trucks to piped petrol, while shifting pipes closer to poor black areas

As for the extreme overcapacity now evident in the Durban-Johannesburg oil pipeline, the main official in the National Energy Regulator of South Africa (Nersa) responsible, Rod Crompton, also criticised Transnet for not understanding why petrol pipeline volumes soon began to fall: “This is a concern in view of the new pipeline capacity that Transnet has brought into operation.’

One reason for the disappointing performance, Crompton argued, was that ‘There still appears to be scope to move more volumes away from road and rail transport to pipeline transport.’ There is enormous scope, to be sure, but no incentive under the prevailing for-profit system.

Matters will probably not improve, because Transnet argues it must now charge customers vast increases to cover the new pipeline costs, and in March 2014 requested a 20% increase in overall revenue for the coming year. Crompton only awarded a 5% rise. This was not unusual, for in 2009, Transnet had requested a 74% pipeline-tariff increase but Nersa instead told it to cut tariffs by 10%.

However, it should be evident that the entire system needs rejigging, for as SDCEA pointed out back in 2008, ‘The cost of petroleum does not truly reflect the environmental costs and the increase in availability of petroleum does not reflect diminishing supplies that can be anticipated over time. As a non-renewable finite resource, petroleum supplies will only decrease and their costs will rise as a larger population struggles to share less and less of it. The availability of petroleum today should reflect its limited life-span as a fuel source.’

Even though oil prices fell 40% in 2014, the application of full-cost accounting to cover climate change and local pollution is long overdue. But this kind of logical response appears far beyond Crompton’s and the South African state’s conceptual capacity.

After the Hillcrest blowout, another critical question concerns the safety of the new pipeline – with its dozens of extra kilometres traversing the southern part of Durban – since so many people live alongside its path. As Peek remarked after the latest spill, ‘Now the residents of South Durban have the new pipeline next to their houses. In Hillcrest, the pipes pass through big gardens and are quite far from the houses, but in Umbumbulu it is literally next to the houses, on people’s doorsteps.’

Back in 1965, when the original Durban-Johannesburg oil pipeline was commissioned, the ‘dirty steel’ used had ‘sulphur inclusions’ and also suffered weld defects including ‘fatigue crack growth and preferential corrosion of seam weld.’ Transnet commissioned an investigation into the pipeline by ‘international experts’ who ‘confirmed the multiple inherent defect phenomena of the pre-1970 pipe used and recommended replacement.’

If so, given the excess capacity in the new pipeline, why was the old pipeline still being used on December 23, as well as back in 2013 at Mooi River? According to government’s 2007 Energy Security Master Plan, ‘When it comes to infrastructure investments in the South African liquid fuels sector, in the next five years, the single most important recommendation is the approval of a new appropriately sized, properly integrated
pipeline, which should come on line in the 2nd quarter of 2010 at the latest.’ The first diesel began flowing through the NMPP in January 2012, but failure to build two final pumping stations – in the case of the Durban harbour station, because of tank buckling – kept the pipe’s throughput at just 50% of capacity, requiring ongoing use of the old line.

But Transnet apparently received word from pipeline managers that there was no problem with the existing pipeline. PricewaterhouseCooper infrastructure expert Georg Hofmeyr told the Financial Mail a year ago, in the magazine’s words, that ‘An assessment of the original pipeline revealed that it was in better condition than originally thought, and drag-reducing agents were introduced to increase its capacity.’

In its 2008 EIA filing against the new Transnet pipeline, SDCEA offered several critiques, including a re-routing that is ‘suspiciously reminiscent of the environmental racism we in South Durban have become familiar with’; inadequate public participation; dubious motivations for the pipeline; government’s failure to prevent, detect or manage pipeline leaks; and climate change. According to SDCEA, ‘The pipeline threatens people with potentially severe environmental safety and health problems (well known to refinery victims in South Durban), in a manner that is discriminatory along class and racial lines.’

An oil spill can be devastating to people in the immediate vicinity, D’Sa warned Hillcrest residents: ‘Health studies in 2002 and 2007 found that the emissions from petro-chemical plants put the cancer risk at 500 times the norm (1:100 000) and that 75% of cancers in South Durban are caused by the release of chemicals from the petro-chemical facilities.’

Another threat to health posed by petroleum is its use in automobiles, an especially troubling phenomenon in Johannesburg since so much of the ambient air pollution there can be traced to highways in addition to the black townships whose low-income residents still rely upon dirty energy. As SDCEA argued in 2008, pollution ‘will be exacerbated by the petroleum and other fuels distributed in this area by the Transnet pipeline. Again, Transnet’s projections for fuel demands fail to reflect actual conditions by ignoring external factors such as deplorable air quality.’ In May 2014, the World Health Organisation confirmed these fears, in a report that cited Johannesburg for particulate matters (10 microns) ten times the recommended maximum, putting Johannesburg in the same league as China’s ultra-polluted cities.
More petrol to Joburg requires more refining in South Durban, a site whose local ecology is already toxin-saturated, SDCEA argued: ‘Durban Bay, in which the harbour is situated, is struggling to cope with the pollution loads from harbour and associated activities, contaminated riverine and storm-water inflows. The expansion will require further removal of aspects of the Bay’s ecosystem, which will in turn further reduce the assimilative capacity of this threatened and fragile estuary.’

Global-scale pollution was also noted in SDCEA’s critique in 2008: ‘The rise of CO2 emissions that will be facilitated by the pipeline is immense, and is only referred to in the [EIA] Draft Scoping Report as a potential legal problem, with no details provided.’ Three years later, at the end of 2011, SDCEA was the main local host for activists during the United Nations climate summit and its leader Desmond D’Sa led the march of 10 000 to protest what was termed the ‘Conference of Polluters.’

**Reducing demand – or increasing supply and redirecting the pipeline**

As SDCEA complained in 2008, ‘We do not believe that Transnet should be rewarded by being allowed to install a new pipeline when they are unable to properly manage their existing one.’ What, then, should have happened in early 2008, as Transnet prepared its final pipeline proposal and as load-shedding first hit South Africa?

A rethink was eminently feasible because in February 2008, a great deal of infrastructure was reaching its full capacity. The chairperson of Standard Bank, Derek Cooper, even advised Mbeki to limit Eskom’s ultra-cheap electricity supply to BHP Billiton. In the words of BHP SA chairperson Vincent Maphai, who was at the same meeting, Cooper believed ‘a quick way to the solution of our power crisis was shutting down Hillside’ smelter in Richards Bay, advice that Maphai hotly disputed, threatening to end the firm’s relations with the bank.

But the logic was inexorable, as Mining writer Michael Coulson affirmed in June 2008: ‘The fact is that aluminium smelters, especially in a country with no supplies of the raw material, bauxite – which is one of the few minerals lacking in our rich resource base – are simply a way of exporting electricity. They don’t create many jobs, and the capital investment per job is enormous. They were a luxury we could afford in the 1980s, but are now expensive white elephants that absorb capital and power that could much more productively employed elsewhere. In terms of power alone, an aluminium smelter consumes as much electricity as a medium-sized town.’

In 2009, in what was an otherwise cautious critique of the call from African National Congress youth to nationalize the mines, SA Communist Party deputy leader (and deputy minister) Jeremy Cronin agreed: ‘An analysis of the systemic realities that are reproducing under-development in our country, must surely lead us to call for greater use of renewable energy sources, for the phasing out of aluminium smelters, and for the re-nationalisation of SASOL.’

In 2012, when margins became dangerously low again, Eskom began paying smelters to shut down, saving 500 megaWatts of power. Just 140 high-consuming companies are
responsible for 40% of South Africa’s electricity demand. BHP alone consumes in the 5-10% range of electricity depending upon the aluminium market’s profitability.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to focus thinking and redirect energies. If this degree of radical rethinking of South Africa’s electricity consumption was possible (and is needed again as more load-shedding looms), then why not rethink the shipping of petrol products to Johannesburg?

Indeed in 2005, there was a major petrol shortage in Johannesburg and Cape Town – but as with Eskom and electricity, instead of promoting economic sanity, resource conservation and public transport, the result was greater pressure for supply enhancement, especially a new Durban-Johannesburg oil pipeline.

In early 2008, there were two routes forward:

- first, reconsider the costs of Johannesburg’s status as the most industrialised mega-city in Africa, and therefore decentralise new economic activity so as to better distribute future populations closer to the availability of resources such as water; or
- second, simply continue to promote limitless consumption, suburban sprawl, the Sandton financial district’s growth (as Johannesburg’s economic motor) and other forms of maldevelopment, by ‘supply enhancement.’

That would entail mega-projects to provide Johannesburg consumers with more electricity (from three new coal-fired power plants), water (through new Lesotho dams) and transport (e.g. the OR Tambo Airport refurbishment and Gautrain for wealthy commuters).

Since the second option was chosen, the next question was whether the largest single infrastructure project up to that point, the new Transnet pipeline, should cross the paths of rich white homeowners and farmers, or instead, poor black residents under the thumb of local ethnic rulers and ruling-party politicians.

**Out of white sight**

The latter route was chosen. One reason is that there were vocal opponents of new digging along (or nearby) the existing pipeline servitude, termed the ‘Northern Corridor’. Near Hillcrest, according to Transnet’s Zitholele consultancy, ‘Assagay landowners expressed grave concerns’ because ‘The likely construction damage and nuisance impact on the Northern Corridor is considered to be severe in the Assagay area as a result of the sensitivity of equestrian businesses to disruption.’ (South Africa’s 1% need their horses for recreation and showing off.)

One of the most effective Hillcrest activists was Lilian Develing, who headed the Combined Ratepayers’ Association in Durban. She was quoted as warning that Transnet’s existing pipeline developed underground leaks: ‘These took some time to discover, causing damage to grazing, and animals had to be moved.’
Other reasons Zitholele gave for routing the pipeline through a Southern Corridor included ecological, agricultural and public open space. Yet just outside Durban, the existing servitude on one long section of the old pipeline – from Merrivale to Cedar’s Post through Umgeni Valley Nature Reserve – is being used for the larger pipe, apparently without any such concerns.

The privileged Hillcrest community’s NIMBY strategy was apparently the key factor. As Peek argued in the wake of the December 2014 spill, ‘Hillcrest residents did not want the new pipeline in their area, so they fought it and Transnet decided to move it.’

Along with Peek, D’Sa was a recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize for activism (in 1998 and 2014, respectively), and in an interview this week he too was fuming: ‘White monopoly capital had a huge influence in the new pipeline’s placement. Even in South Durban, for the majority of white people living here, the pipeline goes nowhere near their houses.’

But, he added, local collaborators helped Transnet get access to black residential sites: ‘The ANC councilors and chiefs in the areas affected by the new pipeline also sold out. They told everyone it would create jobs there. The councilors blocked us even talking to the people there. They were gatekeepers. They also need to be blamed. And other groups taking money from Transnet should also be held accountable.’

**NIMBY – or NOPE?**

There was a bit of resistance in South Durban, to be sure. In August 2010, the black residents of Adams Mission resisted Transnet’s 11-page temporary servitude agreement and an ‘angry resident’ complained about the construction: ‘Our houses are beginning to crack because of the constant digging Transnet must take their pipes and find an alternate route far from our homes.’

The NIMBY narrative needs reworking. As Naomi Klein argues about the climate change threat, *This changes everything*. ‘Policy elites and community activists alike should be properly preparing for a post-carbon future. The appropriate narrative is then to question our overconsumption of fossil fuels, especially via an overpriced and dangerous pipeline whose long delay in construction resulted in the use of the existing pipe beyond its lifespan.

What is missing is a set of arguments and pressure strategies aimed not at ‘an alternative route far from our homes’ (of whatever race or class orientation) but instead at a different economic and transport strategy not so reliant upon fossil fuels, so instead of supply enhancement, demand-side management leads to major conservation gains.

The only way to do this is to realign community politics away from NIMBY and towards eco-socialism, and to insert bodies not just into EIA documents but onto the streets and into the fields to block pipelines like Transnet’s. As Klein puts it in *This Changes Everything*, ‘Blockadia is not a specific location on a map but rather a roving transnational conflict zone that is cropping up with increasing frequency and intensity wherever extractive projects are attempting to dig and drill, whether for open-pit mines, or gas fracking, or tar sands oil pipelines.’
First, if ‘the trusty slur NIMBY has completely lost its bite’ in this climate justice movement, who is staffing Klein’s Blockadia? ‘The people at the forefront – packing local council meetings, marching in capital cities, being hauled off in police vans, even putting their bodies between the earth-movers and earth – do not look much like your typical activist, nor do the people in one Blockadia site resemble those in another. Rather, they each look like the places where they live, and they look like everyone: the local shop owners, the university professors, the high school students, the grandmothers.’

For Klein, it is vital for people to link interests, in the way that has not yet happened between Hillcrest and South Durban: ‘What is clear is that fighting a giant extractive industry on your own can seem impossible, especially in a remote, sparsely populated location. But being part of a continent-wide, even global, movement that has the industry surrounded is a very different story. Blockadia is turning the tables.’

She continues, ‘The fossil fuel companies, in short, are no longer dealing with those Big Green groups that can be silenced with a generous donation or a conscience-clearing carbon offset program. The communities they are facing are, for the most part, not looking to negotiate a better deal – whether in the form of local jobs, higher royalties, or better safety standards. More and more, these communities are simply saying “No.” No to the pipeline.’

Instead of NIMBY, the new call-out is simply ‘NOPE’: Not On Planet Earth.

The NOPE demand was made by SDCEA back in 2008, as it contemplated Transnet’s expenditure of billions on the pipeline, but the organisation also expressed the perceived need for a short-termist NIMBY narrative: ‘Nearly every aspect of this pipeline project is contrary to national and global efforts to achieve environmental sustainability... The money should instead be invested in finding other ways of powering Johannesburg via renewable energy sources, or in the meantime, developing a shorter – and less environmentally racist – route for fuel delivery compared to the southerly route.’

There was more NOPE logic in SDCEA’s submission: ‘Global, climatologic and economic forces are pushing toward a sustainable energy package. It will ultimately cost South Africa more to put off adopting environmentally responsible programs because if we wait decades before working on the Long Term Mitigation Scenario commitments, the changes will not be able to occur gradually.’

Combining NIMBY and NOPE, SDCEA concluded, ‘If the north route is found to be unacceptable then the pipeline idea needs to be abandoned in full. The billions of rand that it will cost to build the pipeline should be spent on renewable energy and other more sustainable means. This would be the preferred option in SDCEA’s view because we feel that the presence of the pipeline will have adverse effects not only on the people of south Durban, but on the whole of South Africa, as it represents a major investment in an unsustainable energy program.’

Specifically, SDCEA suggested: ‘Refurbishing the existing pipeline in an incremental manner (instead of doubling capacity), as maintenance is required, replacing the
sections with a larger pipeline, using the existing route and servitudes, and installing additional pump stations, as and when required. Accelerating the upgrade of railways and public transport in Johannesburg, so as to get more people and product off the roads to minimise transport-related congestion, fuel burning, emissions and associated health effects, by establishing urban transport networks to enable safe and affordable rail transport, linked to park and ride centres with connections to bus and taxi routes.’

What tools are available? Klein endorses fossil fuel corporate divestment, and this tool is one that, as in its use against Transnet by anti-apartheid activists during the 1980s, can be very powerful.

After all, Transnet is not financially healthy. Although its March 2014 annual report showed profits of R5.2 billion on revenues of R56.6 billion, the Sunday Times offered a corrective: ‘The bottom line is flattered to some extent by technicalities such as a sharp drop in the revaluation of assets, a drop which helped the 12.3% increase in earnings before interest, tax and depreciation to translate into a 25% increase in bottom-line profit.’

In June 2014, Transnet’s credit rating was cut to BBB-, just one level above junk status. There were further financial ‘problems in the pipeline for Transnet,’ Business Day reported, as a result of declining confidence in the parastatal’s ability to deliver. In mid-2013, for example, when Transnet offered a R750 million security to overseas investors, only R122 million was bid for, leading to the bond’s abandonment.

SDCEA has threatened Transnet with a financial sanctions campaign before, due to the R250 billion port-petrochemical expansion in South Durban. The last such campaign it initiated, in early 2010, created a near-crisis for Eskom because once campaigning began, major World Bank shareholders ranging from Norway to the United States refused to support the Bank’s largest-ever loan: $3.75 billion for the Medupi coal-fired powerplant, even after a high-profile appeal from then finance minister Pravin Gordhan.

Infrastructure of this sort, wrote University of Manchester geographers Erik Swyngedouw and Maria Kaika in a pathbreaking article in the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research fifteen years ago, needs special attention. Projects like the Durban-Johannesburg pipelines are ‘largely hidden, opaque, invisible, disappearing underground, locked into pipes, cables, conduits, tubes, passages and electronic waves. It is exactly this hidden form that renders the tense relationship between nature and the city blurred, that contributes to severing the process of social transformation of nature from the process of urbanization. Perhaps more importantly, the hidden flows and their technological framing render occult the social relations and power mechanisms that are scripted in and enacted through these flows.’

It is our work in society, regardless of whether we live in South Durban, Hillcrest, Johannesburg, inbetween or far beyond, to unveil these power relations and wreck them, hopefully faster than Transnet’s pipelines – old and new – continue to wreck and be wrecked.

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