

Don't take what belongs to us

Robby Mokgalaka, Groundwork Newsletter Vol 17 No 1 - March 2015

“Do not call another meeting. Ocilwane (Part of Fuleni) does not want the mine no matter what you offer us, so do not come back. Today you have heard the people complain that you are ignoring our voices and we are being undermined and disrespected. You know we speak Zulu, yet you come to the community with a presentation in English. You are not welcome to come again.”

When addressing Ibutho Coal's Director, Thembi Myeni, Fuleni's main spokesperson on mining matters, Phila Ndzimande, did not mince his words as he summed up the comments from the community in the public participation meeting.

The Fuleni community showed us the strength of a united community in the coal struggle. In July 2014, the Department of Environmental Affairs in KwaZulu Natal (KZN) refused to give an environmental authorization license to Ibutho Coal and the decision was influenced by the resistance of the Fuleni community. Ibutho Coal is planning an underground mine starting from the northern side of the area and following the coal seam, which covers about forty kilometres, towards eShowe.

The community showed bravery and determination when Ibutho Coal mine was sent packing from their public participation meeting on Sunday the 31st of August 2014. The meeting was cut short by Fuleni residents before Marietjie Eksteen of Jacana Environmental Consulting could finish her presentation. Fuleni is one of the four villages directly affected by the proposed open cast coal mine. The community turned out in force, and close to a hundred people gathered to hear what Ibutho Coal has in store for them. The community was infuriated when the consultants could not explain why they had not followed the required Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure and had started installing pipes without consulting with them. In terms of the EIA process, the public participation was supposed to be conducted before the installation of pipes. I have observed that hell has no fury as a united community. The soaring of emotions amongst community members against the consultants led to the meeting being called to an end to prevent violence erupting.

This community, located in the northern part of KZN, is experiencing a coal struggle for the first time. This small victory did not come easy, as the community at first lacked the necessary knowledge to challenge the coal mine proposals they are facing. However their willingness to learn and fight, and their preparedness going into the meeting drove them to confidence in challenging Ibutho Coal.

Fuleni is about ten kilometres away from the Somkhele open cast coal mine, and even at that distance the residents live with the impacts of blasting, coal dust, contaminated water, cattle becoming ill and dying, increased respiratory diseases, asthma and so on. When they heard Ibutho Coal expected them to live five hundred metres from the open pit, the hall exploded. In 1997, they were forced to move from their previous area to Fuleni and they are using this as one of the grounds to resist the mine.

Additionally, the area has been used for agricultural purposes and so the arrival of the coal mine poses a serious threat to the livelihood of the people.

The traditional leadership and the local counsellor who supported the mine are rumoured to have been promised financial benefits by the mining officials at the expense of the interest of the community. All these factors coming into play made it very difficult for the chief and the local people to support the leadership within the community.

groundWork and Global Environmental Trust (GET) realised the need to assist the community in the struggle. Two community exchange meetings were arranged by the organizations, with the sole purpose of creating an information-sharing opportunity with communities already affected by coal mines. This was done based on the traditional notion that “what the eye sees and the ear hears is what the mind believes”. Both meetings played an important role in empowering the communities with knowledge on environmental issues and reinforcing solidarity in the coal struggle. Philani Ndzimande represented the Fuleni community at the meeting in the Highveld. This meeting was attended by seasoned coal campaigners, representing more than twenty communities in the Highveld, and a toxic tour was arranged to visit the abandoned mines.

The second exchange meeting took place in the Somkhele village near Fuleni. Four different villages were included in the exchange trip, and most of these villages have already been exposed to the injustices of the coal mines. The first site visit of the exchange trip was to the cemetery in Dubelenkunzi, where we saw the graves that had been exhumed from the land to be mined. The sight of the condition of the graves, coupled with narrated stories, triggered emotions in the viewers.

It was mentioned that the mine had promised to pay villagers one head of cattle and a goat for each grave that was going to be relocated, so that people could perform the traditional rituals to appease and inform the deceased about the reburial. Instead, the mine has given each family homestead a cow and a goat, irrespective of how many graves were moved in each family. This means families have been unable to afford to perform the required ceremony for each grave. Amongst other promises made by the mine in the exhumation process was that tombstones would be erected on each grave at the expense of the mine. That was not the case, as we saw the unmarked graves.

The Fuleni visitors were also shocked to see the condition of the graves and to hear the shenanigans of the mine, played just to get a way into the area in order to mine. The situation drove home a loud message to the Fuleni community members that mines are not to be trusted. The exposure in the two community exchange meetings strengthened the unity in the struggle against Ibutho Coal.

Both exchange meetings were influential and helpful to the Fuleni community, feeding them with knowledge and strengthening their position in the struggle.

The starting point of Ibutho Coal’s proposed mine is approximately eight hundred metres from the Hluhluwe Game Reserve. The Hluhluwe Game Reserve is the oldest reserve in South Africa. The protection of the rhinos in the Hluhluwe Reserve is part of a rich legacy of the late Dr. Ian Player who passed away last year. Dr. Player tirelessly advocated for the protection of the rhinos for many years before his death.

At his memorial service, attended by many well respected people, one of his colleagues and friends made a touching plea advocating for the protection of the wild in the Hluhluwe Reserve, saying to the Minister of Environmental Affairs, present at the memorial, “Don’t take the wild out of the wilderness”