

The demolition of the Athlone towers- safety or another opportunity for capitalist profits?

The track record of the metro Cape City municipality over the handling of asbestos and health and safety is pathetic. Over the years, at least 30 workers have died from asbestos-related diseases (several had worked at Athlone power station); the city has been forced to have a programme of life-long monitoring for its employees who have been exposed to asbestos fibres. Charles Kadalie, who still works for the city, contracted asbestosis from his work at the Athlone power station as an electrical maintenance supervisor. All power stations built before the 1970's, like the Athlone power station, made extensive use of asbestos as an insulator.

Recently, the city has once again shown its disdain for workers and the community by subcontracting an outside firm to refurbish asbestos sheeting on council dwellings in Blackheath; the community representatives stated that the workers were not properly briefed on the dangers of the material they were working with; they did not take the necessary precautions when working with this hazardous material; besides all the problems relating to such a lax approach by the City authorities, the workers were on contract for an outside company and not likely to receive the necessary follow up lifelong monitoring that is necessary for asbestos workers. [Asbestosis takes 15-20 or more years to manifest itself; by this time the contractor would have long dismissed the workers and they would not even be aware of their affliction]. This outsourcing of the city's responsibilities once again raises the central point of labour broking; with all the tinkering that the government and big capital proposes to the Labour Relations Act, the bottom line will still be that employers (especially the big companies) will be able to outsource responsibility for the health of workers.

Gregory Jones died in 2006, falling inside the Athlone towers, while removing some asbestos piping; did his family receive due compensation? The DA alleges that during 95-97 it was the last time that asbestos was cleared from the Athlone towers; so which is true? Were the towers cleared in 97 or as recently as 2006? Can we really believe the City when they say the Towers are free of asbestos? The city claims that the towers are free of asbestos but ex-workers insist that there still is asbestos there. [we know there has been a process to attempt to remove the asbestos but how do we know this has been successful (especially as the microfibres are notoriously difficult to remove and it just takes 1 fibre to affect a person)? Why did the city not disclose that there are huge amounts of asbestos on site, in the piping and cladding of the adjacent buildings? Has the coal onsite been removed to reduce the fire risk? [The coal is housed in asbestos cement-cladded structures adjacent to the towers]; did the city test for a range of hazardous particles (such as lead, etc)? What was in the health and safety plan that the City prepared when putting out a tender for the demolition? What measures are in place in the health and plan of the demolition company? Why did the city only visit a handful of households in Ring road, Pinelands? Why did they not go door to door in Athlone, Langa and Pinelands? [we are told to keep our windows closed and stay indoors, but the residents in Joe Slovo and parts of Langa do not even have inside toilets; many windows are either old iron-type or made from scrap material, that do not completely close] What has been done to take samples of the air inside the towers and in the surrounding areas before time; what is being done to take

air samples during and after the explosion in the surrounding areas and on site so that if there are toxic residues found, residents and workers who become sick as a result of the demolition will have recourse to medical care and compensation from the city? Have all the workers on site been informed of their rights and of the safety and health risks? Has the City discussed the health and safety plan with the municipal unions? It seems the City paid more attention to the falcons than the workers and residents. [and even the falcons, who have merely been placed in an adjacent building, directly in line of the dust and sonic boom from the pending demolition, are at risk].

When a municipal worker died in an explosion at an electricity sub-station, did the City take responsibility and act in a transparent way? Indications are that the union has been sidelined despite evidence that the City had been negligent in ensuring the proper maintenance of its sub-station equipment.

More than two years ago when the province (among others) launched the eviction order against the residents of Joe Slovo in Langa; the court papers revealed then already, that the Athlone Towers would be demolished and that housing from the gateway project was erected in its place; with the scrap between Absa and Fnb over building 'gap' housing for the government, it is easy to calculate that the banks stand to gain tens, if not hundreds of millions from housing on this prime site. Is this the real reason for the indecent haste by the city to demolish the towers?

Besides ensuring the minimizing of risk for the workers and the surrounding communities and publishing all the health and safety reports related to the demolition, including the reports of the air monitoring, the city should house, for the day, at the city's expense, all the residents who stay within a 5 km radius of the towers [many of the hotels are almost empty so this could be made to be part of their 'social responsibility' programme].

When the city upgraded the highway at hospital bend, with a simple monitoring of the traffic flow in the respective lanes (together with modern traffic-flow computer programmes) it would have been easy for the city to pick up that the flyover from Groote Schuur hospital to the city-bound traffic, due to the low volumes of vehicles using this road, was completely unnecessary; they should have been able to pick up that the design would constrict the outbound rush-hour traffic. Yet they still spent R300 million on a project that should have cost less than R50 million.

This city works for the capitalist; they don't care about us.

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