

Activists voice anger against global steel giant

BY UFRIEDA HO

A worldwide network of environmental activists have made their voices heard in a globalised protest action against steel giant Arcelor Mittal.

The protests coincided with the company's annual general meeting held at its Luxembourg head offices on Tuesday and included parallel protest action held in Vanderbijlpark, south of Joburg, and also in the US, Romania, India, Kazakhstan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Czech Republic and Ukraine.

A shadow annual report, a 40-page document detailing the environmental and social justice track record of Arcelor Mittal, was also released.

A local activist from groundWork and Friends of the Earth, Bobby Peek, says the shadow annual report is a powerful tool to sensitise shareholders to the true nature of their investments. "Investors are often ignorant about what is happening, and we believe that investors, who in South Africa include some church groups, need to act with a greater moral authority by disinvesting."

The report calls on Arcelor Mittal to implement environmental and health action plans in consultation with plant workers and residents who live adjacent to the plants, and for governments around the world and financial institutions to halt tax breaks and funding support to the company.

Peek says Arcelor Mittal has a worldwide legacy of cutting costs, disrespecting environmental best practices and ignoring the rights of people to a healthy living, which is why it is the target of the global protest action.

He says the piggybacking on global networking has bolstered the efforts of environmentalists as they take aim at massive transnational corporations.

"We need to be affecting the decision-makers and the people who take the final decisions, which is why two local activists have joined with our international counterparts at the Luxembourg head office."

The chairperson of the Vanderbijlpark Environmental Justice Alliance (Veja), Phineas Malapela, says Arcelor Mittal has to change its practices to be transparent and accountable.

"We have had a long battle with Arcelor Mittal, and I know

Call for access to environmental master plan

the problems they can cause because I live here and my brothers and my father worked for the

company. We all suffer from asthma and other respiratory problems.

"We can't wish Arcelor Mittal away, but they have to rehabilitate the environment and help people who are now sick from working at their plants," says Malapela.

Veja is demanding unrestricted access to the company's environmental master plan and to be involved in plotting out the rehabilitation plan for the area, which is identified as one of the country's priority environmental zones.

Arcelor Mittal spokesperson Tami Didiza says the company has set aside R2-billion for environmental rehabilitation and says it maintains an open-door policy with local environmental action groups.

"Last year I invited Veja representatives to meet with us and to see our master plan, they are still to respond to that invitation," he says.

