



# Community News

Newsletter of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance

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## **Engen Celebrates 50 Years of Profits, Whilst Polluting.....**

Engen celebrates 50 years of profits in South Africa. But does the community have anything to celebrate? 50 years of petroleum refining has left an indelible and sooty mark on residents and has also defined the context of spatial planning in South Durban. That's about putting the needs of industry first, residents second. That's why two refineries and dirty and toxic industries sandwiched around the residential areas leave us with bad air and dead and dying family members. But we can't claim because the legal apparatus protects the strong, and we can't prove anything because the inspectorate won't inspect and then the samplers don't sample and the system is always conveniently broken.

So what are the highlights of co-existing with Stanvac/Mobil/Engen and now Petronas? Do we count as benefits the number of gas flares that provide free night time lighting or maybe the early morning wake up call of sirens and fumes? Perhaps a free car wash after yet another soot and occasional catalyst deposition? In the 1950's a multi-racial community of market gardeners existed at the site chosen for Engen. Naturally they didn't fit into the industrial vision so they were 'relocated'. Now our community members are again being relocated at the behest of Engen – apparently Engen has only just realised that it's too dangerous to live next door to a refinery without a buffer zone. But they are not telling us how dangerous or how many would die if Engen leaked their hydrofluoric acid out into the night. And we sit and wait...for the big one. Will it be death by LPG, death by petrol or diesel, maybe it will be long and slow as our organs are gradually invaded by leukaemia's, melanoma's, liver and lung cancers. Our children already gasp and wheeze from asthmatic attacks. While Engen makes fortunes, we spend fortunes on **medical bills** - fortunes that we don't have. Engen will say that they have given money to community projects but most of that was only after the nightmare toxic lindane was discovered in our children's playing grounds. A company Engen owned was responsible. Ask how much money this multinational has actually spent on social upliftment in South Durban? Ask how much that is in comparison with what they have spent on their marketing budget and decide for yourself.

Engen will also tell you about their Environmental Improvement Plan and how successful it's been. But did they explain why for decades they dumped 50 tons of sulphur dioxide per day into our air, 365 days a year and this excluded what was emitted during plant upsets and flares. Was it possible that they didn't see it as a problem because this was a predominantly a segregated area and they had the apartheid government on their side? Are they making full and truthful disclosures now? Being a strategic national industry can be very helpful to a polluting industry. There have been 50 years of innumerable accidents and pollution incidents (some fatal) and scarcely a fine or investigation to show for it – surely a remarkable record of government inattention and/or complicity. Basically Engen can almost do as they please even today under our democratic Government. Take for example the changeover to unleaded fuel where Engen (unlike their refinery neighbours) have chosen the cheapest and also the most toxic additive as the preferred route to providing unleaded fuels. They also state in the EIA that they will continue to use this substance (MMT, a toxin that can apparently cause Alzheimer related disease) until forced to stop by government and it gets better because after that we get MTBE- a potent, odorous, groundwater polluter that is extremely difficult if not impossible to remove from soil and groundwater if it is spilt. They plan to pump it via pipeline from the harbour to the refinery – and we all know what those pipelines are like... It reflects on the nature of their business – do it on the cheap and leave the surrounding community to bear the real costs.



**Engen Refinery Flaring at Night**

## The Ship That Never Sails

How we wished it did. During the innocence of childhood when we knew no better, we were proud of this ship that never sailed. A few flickering lights on the horizon below us, which today has grown into a city of lights dominating the horizon. But like a rusty tanker, it leaks and spews its toxic cargo on our community daily.

While at boarding school I stood up before class proudly to announce that my brother helped build this ship that never sailed and that it was the best in South Africa. Little did I know in the seventies that, that which I held in high esteem was actually slowly killing our people while reaping the profits of poor environmental production.

The renowned sulphur smells I can remember as far back as memory takes me. And the heavy breathing of an asthma attack is all too vivid in my memory. During the darkness of night, my asthma would result in me displacing my parents from their big brass bed, while I was placed upon it with a crude burner that heated some menthol based oil to clear my chest. In all those many difficult nights, two things kept me alive – the voice of my mother and the flickering of the flame of the burner.

Fortunately my parents made some link between the asthma and the pollution and shipped me off to boarding school where I bragged about this refinery; this ship that never sailed, to all my fellow pupils.

My story is not unique. There are many stories of other children and families that have suffered and sat throughout the night nursing young children while the bosses of Engen sat in their fancy suburban homes, reading fairytales to their children who were not having to spend a night focusing on a flame to try and fall off to sleep because of the pain of lack of oxygen and too much sulphur in the air. However, it was not only the children that were suffering. It was also those that saw working in the refinery as the ultimate goal in life – for we knew no other. But this goal was and does hold Wentworth in abject poverty. Instead of employing our brothers and sisters directly – there is no relationship between the senior management of Engen and those that are exploited on the ground - we have our kinsfolk having to be employed by labour brokers, who answer to contractors, who answer to the senior management. A four level division with no legal framework for accountability by the senior management of Engen for the loss of a labourers' life. As Fatima Meer said in 2001 before the World Conference Against racism, that even slaves were better off for they had a direct relationship with their masters, something labourers at Engen do not have.

Today Engen celebrates fifty years of operations in South Africa, of those forty years were supporting an apartheid state breaking an oil embargo that was called for by the ANC. Since 1994, the people of south Durban have been vigilant in their struggle against Engen, with some even calling for Engen's relocation, yet today as we celebrate Engen's 50 years in our community, Engen is working with the city to ensure that this ship never sails and that the people adjacent to it loose their land and homes to make way for industry security.

Yes it is personal – and the refinery managers need to get to know it is personal. When you come into our neighbourhood and disrupt our lives it is personal, when our children are suffering it is personal – so do not tell me not to get personal. **BY: BOBBY PEEK**

## 50 Years of Profits vs. 30 Years of Misery



"My family and I moved to Treasure Beach, Ballerina Terrace in 1974. We have lived next to Engen Refinery ever since. We have had to endure nothing but medical bills from Engen's dust, noise and oil spills. Toxic emissions are let out at any hour of the day and night, causing us to have sore throats and eyes and constant coughs. Whenever you phone with a complaint, they are famous for apologizing for the inconvenience. My sons have all moved out due to Engen's constant polluting. At present, my daughter, son-in-law and my two grandchildren live with us– the two little ones have constant colds.

I have logged endless complaints to no avail. The flaring has never stopped, and often it is so bright at night, who needs to switch on the lights? My grandchildren can't get to sleep or they wake up in the middle of the night coughing. The smell wakes you up because it is really bad.

Our house has to be painted year in and year out. My car has lost its colour, and that has now been sold. My daughter's car has oil spots on it every day. How many more years do I have to suffer? Who pays for this? "

**By: Frank Appenah - Treasure Beach Environmental Forum**