

Why does ArcelorMittal hate Bosnia?

by Jasmin Mujanovi? - Saturday, December 22, 2012

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Pollution, people and tombstones in Zenica.

Owned by the Indian billionaire Lakshmi Mittal, [ArcelorMittal](#) is the world's largest steel producer—creating some 93 billion USD of revenue as of 2011. Granted, steel is an essential building block of the modern world yet ArcelorMittal's obscene profit margins do raise the question of "how are you possibly making *this much* money?"

Turns out, profitability margins are greatly aided by the economic pillaging and environmental destruction of a still-recovering-from-war southeastern European locale: Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The central-Bosnian city of [Zenica](#) has for decades been one of the industrial centers of the region. The steel mills in the area, prior to the outbreak of the 1992-1995 war, employed some 25,000 people—a shining beacon of the Yugoslav state's productive capacities. Today, owned by ArcelorMittal, that number is just over 3000—with the company actually looking to [downsize even further](#), according to local union organizers.

Yet the story here is not (so much) about the bargain-bin prices at which foreign multinationals have purchased massive industrial complexes across the former Yugoslavia—often only to dismantle and [sell them off in parts](#).

No, the bigger story is about the massive ecological disaster zone that the company has transformed Zenica and its steel mills into, which, even at the height of their Yugoslav-era production, did not produce a fraction of the pollution they do today. The [footage](#) speaks for itself.

In one of the largest demonstrations in recent memory, the citizens of Zenica symbolically gathered at five-to-twelve to demand a change in policy from both the company and the (utterly incompetent and bought-and-paid-for) local authorities. Both, naturally, have promised further investments into sustainable production technologies and monitoring equipment. In an [unrelated story](#), "[e]very second, 24 euros are

lost through corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina." As I said, one should have nothing but the highest expectations of these responsible, law-abiding kleptocrats.

Meanwhile, this also seems like a good opportunity to remind ourselves of ArcelorMittal *other* gift to the people of Bosnia: the [ArcelorMittal Orbit statue in London](#), built in advance of the 2012 Olympics. A gift for the people of Bosnia, you ask? Well, no, not really. Actually, it's more like an incredibly vile affront.

See, in 2004 ArcelorMittal began making a serious play in the Bosnian market, purchasing "a throng of iron ore mines in Bosnia, including one located at the former site of a Bosnian Serb-run concentration camp. For the steelmaker, the promise of enormous profits easily assuaged any ethical concerns that came with the purchase of the new site." "Ethical concerns," like the fact that one of the mines, Omarska, had been part of [a notorious Serb nationalist concentration camp](#) established during the war. A site where, at least, [according to one report](#) somewhere between 4000-5000 people were systematically murdered. In short, Omarska and the wider [Prijeedor region](#) were one of the epicenters of the genocide in Bosnia.

In purchasing the site, ArcelorMittal made promises to the survivors that they would build a memorial center to commemorate the horrors that had taken place there. This was in 2005:

But the promise quickly lost momentum, and in 2006, the newly merged steel-manufacturing giant ArcelorMittal suspended progress on the memorial project, reflecting a shift in attitude prompted by the local mayor's public insistence that Omarska camp had only functioned as a "transit and interrogation center." Finally, on the May 9th anniversary of Victory Day this year, survivors were shocked to find themselves [barred from visiting the Bosnian camp site at all](#). Just three days later, the 377-foot tall, \$35-million ArcelorMittal Orbit was officially completed and unveiled in London's Olympic Park, ready to greet the masses in July with a £15 admission fee even [Anish Kapoor finds exorbitant](#).

Bosnia's experience with ArcelorMittal is perhaps marginal when compared to larger and more systemic forms of corporate criminality, witnessed across the Global South, in particular. Yet it is also paradigmatic especially for Canadians today, gripped as we are by the growing strength of the [#IdleNoMore](#) movement, a movement that has so much to do with the defense of our shared ecosphere and remembering histories of abuse and extermination.

Because Bosnia is a little land, and the Bosnians an impoverished peoples, on the periphery of the glittering mega-federation of the European Union—that in any case is [working out so well for our cousins in Slovenia](#)—quaint notions like pollution standards and respect for genocide survivors don't really count for much. Why does ArcelorMittal hate Bosnia? They don't, they just don't *care*—which is, in actuality, far worse. Cheap resources, cheaper labour and no legal obligations is what ArcelorMittal, like any good capitalist enterprise, cares about. Hence, Bosnia.

Meanwhile, the folks at [EKO Forum](#) in Zenica have announced further actions and protests against the company and the local authorities. In a winter of discontent, in the rapacious maw of global capital, from Canada to Bosnia we should remember—change happens, but only when *we* are idle no more.