

The Greatest Threat to Future Stability in Our Country Is the Greatest Strength of the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* Movement (SA) (Shackdwellers)¹

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Abstract

In these two talks a theory of a politics of the poor is elaborated. It is noted that the poor have effectively been excluded from substantive citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa resulting in a permanent crisis in the ordinary lives of the poor. It is argued that there are many responses to this crisis, some of which are dangerous and some of which hold out some hope. A politics of the poor is put forward as the concretization of the latter. It is stressed that a politics of the poor should be a non-representative politics. Both electoral party politics and NGO substitutionism are rejected in favour of the development of popular democratic counter-power where people live and work. Genuine solidarity, it is argued, should be negotiated on this terrain rather than simply declared from above on the NGO terrain. It is made clear that this is predicated on a recognition of the intellectual work done in poor communities.

Keywords *Abahlali baseMjondolo* • democracy • shackdwellers • solidarity • South Africa

Many things have been said. Many things have been seen. Many policies have been passed. Many people have voted. But what has been done has not been done for the poor. It has been done for the rich. The poor are outside. We have no country. This is not the democracy that the poor fought for. We must ask, are we citizens of this country? If we are not then who are we and where are we?

Afraid

I am afraid. Every day is an emergency in the jondolos. I am afraid that the AIDS epidemic and poverty are the greatest threat to future stability in our country. Our people are dying. Our people are struggling just to survive. Our desperation and anger can go in many directions. I am afraid that it won't always go the people who are getting richer while we suffer.

I remain afraid when I see how much is said at the high level of government. I am afraid when government and the NGOs and academics speak about the poor all the time but so few want to speak *to* the poor. I am afraid when it becomes clear that our job is just to vote and then watch the rich speak about us as we get poorer.

We have seen that when the wild forests and plantations of the rich are on fire, there are often large helicopters with hundreds of tons of water to extinguish the fires. But when our shacks are on fire the helicopters and ambulances are nowhere to be found. Mhlengi Khumalo, a one-year-old boy, died in a fire in Kennedy Road. When this happened there was neither briyani nor Durban Electricity on the scene. Helicopters only come for us when we want to march. The State comes for us when we try to say what we think. We must understand this lesson very well. We are on our own. We have no choice but to fight. It is not about us but our children, our nation and our country, South Africa.

I become ever more afraid when I see that so much money is being spent at the high level (e.g. at conference centres, hotels, uShaka, stadiums, etc.) and that so little is being spent at the grassroot level where most of our people live and suffer. Communities have had enough death. Families are not only facing this high rate of mortality but must also face the funeral expenses which also threaten our safety. It is clear that AIDS breeds poverty and poverty breeds AIDS. Both must be fought if we are not to be afraid in the future. It is warned that this is not about making small changes to policies. This is a class struggle. This is a struggle between the Haves and Don't Haves. Our society can only be saved if the Don't Haves win this struggle. If we lose this struggle everyone will have to live afraid forever. Everything will be broken everywhere.

Brave

However, I am brave now. More and more thousands of us are becoming brave. We are brave enough to fight this struggle now. We are brave because for the first time in history of this country, South Africa, the poorest of the poor are saying that it is time for us to begin to say, 'This is who we are. This is where we are. This is how we live. This is what we feel. This is what we think. This is how we want things to be done so that we can live without fear'.

The *Abahlali baseMjondolo* movement (SA) is the hope of the hopeless, the home of the homeless, the voice of the poor of the poorest. It is the ground for He/She who knows not that She/He knows not that He/She knows not but

knows that the poor suffer, knows that this country is rich and knows exactly what made and makes this country rich. Our movement seeks to bring the government to the ground, to bring the institutions of government and the private sector to the ground. We fight to bring policies that affect our people under the control of our people. We are realistic. We start where we are but we fight to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. We fight to make those who are blind to poverty to be able to see the poverty that we see. We work to show those who are blind to the power of the poor to see the strength of the strong poor. The threat of fires, storms, illnesses, police brutality and government repression make it clear that if we do not stand up now and act together, then, I am afraid, the poor citizens would once be remembered to have not survived to be part of the beauty of this nature.

Strength

The shackdwellers (*Abahlali baseMjondolo*) have acknowledged that the majority of this country and this continent and this world are the poor who are often undermined. This has made it possible for us to mobilize the broader communities who feel neglected by the State. It is the very same poverty and neglect by the State that throws us together in our settlements and from that togetherness we become strong. Our masses, our unity and diversity is our strength, our pain, our voice. We have become the strong poor. The politics of the strong poor is an anti-party politics. Our politics is not to put someone in an office. Our politics is to put our people above that office. And when we have finished with one office we move on to the next office. Our politics is also not a politics of a few people who have learnt some fancy political words and who expect everyone to follow them because they know these words. Our politics is a traditional home politics, which is understood very well by all the old *mamas* (mothers) and *gogos* (grandmothers) because it affects their lives and gives them a home. In this home everybody is important, everybody can speak and we look after each other and think about the situation and plan our fight together. We believe that housing policy does not only require housing specialists, rich consultants and government. We believe that housing policy requires, most importantly, the people who need the houses. But we also know, as poor communities and as shackdwellers, that the broader poor have no choice but to play a role in shaping and re-shaping this country into an anti-capitalist system. This is the task that the betrayal of our struggle and the struggles of our ancestors has given to us. We are on our own. We have to fight this fight. Although we will fight for land and housing in the city we know that this is not only a fight for land and housing in the city. Giving reasonable budgets to democratic development in district municipalities and advancing rural areas will mean that people will no longer have no choice but to leave their homes and build shacks everywhere. If the shackdwellers do not belong

to this country then they must be sent back to where they belong. If they do belong here, then they are entitled to all the benefits of the soil of South Africa.

Developing an Alternative

The alternative, the direction of our struggle, will come out of the thinking that we do in our communities. We are doing this thinking all the time in our communities. Tonight we can use this opportunity to do it here. Let us start with some questions. I will ask these questions now and then we can turn this lecture into a meeting. The world is full of lectures. Lectures usually come to us as one more way of making us sit quietly while rich people think for us. In our struggle we need meetings where everyone can speak and think together.

- Have the poor Durban shackdwellers succeeded in their struggle for land and housing in the city? What has been won? What must still be won? What have we learned from our struggle?
- Have the Western Cape QQ Section and Anti-eviction Campaign succeeded in their struggle for housing? What can be learnt from their struggle?
- Have the South Durban Communities succeeded in their fight against the threats from the Engin refinery and the generally poisonous environment? What can be learnt from this struggle?
- Have the flat residents such as Bayview, Albert Park, Sydenham Heights, New Lands and Phoenix been attended to? What must still be done? What can we learn from this struggle?
- Have Bachu, Baig, Xulu, Shezi and Dimba been removed from the offices of the community? Why are these people imposed on us? What should we do about it?
- Have the deaths of Monica Ngcobo, Tebogo Mkhonza, Komi Zulu and Mhlengi Khumalo brought about any changes in our communities? What have we learnt from these deaths? Why are our people being killed by the police, by fire, by councillors? Why does no one high up seem to care?
- What stops the poor from becoming the political majority of this country in which they are the majority of citizens? What stops us from deciding the policies that affect our lives? What stops us from being in control of our future?
- What strategy will force the blind government to see and get the deaf government to hear? What strategy will force those who are rich to share, those who do not give account to account?
- How can we unite our struggling communities and movements to make them stronger?

I am optimistic that the 'will' of the poor will soon be done simply because the poor are the majority of this country and the majority is beginning to speak for itself. We have the courage to do what must be done. But this optimism can

only be kept for as long as democracy prevails so democracy must be protected and deepened. This is why we took Sutcliffe to court when he tried to ban us from marching. Comrades, let us now think about these questions together.

Note

1. Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, July 2006.

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Sekwane! Sekwanele! (Enough Is Enough!)¹

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Comrades! I am not used to sitting, I am not used to comfortable chairs; so don't be taken aback that I will be standing. I am used to Zabalaza, to struggling; there's no time to sleep and to be jolly with the comfortable chairs. I am going to use this opportunity to talk about the pain and suffering we are facing with the hard of the hardest in our own country; the pain of arrests, beatings, detention and death.

The question that many comrades have raised is the issue of two classes in our society: the high class and the lower class. Some people refer to the lower class as the middle class. And I think it is very unfair to call the poor of the poorest as the middle class. Fazel Khan² has already indicated that he has seven taps and a number of toilets. He also has a vehicle that he uses to move around. Therefore he cannot be compared to the person who has nothing, and this is why I think it is very unfair to refer to the lower class as the middle class.

For years I have tried the so-called diplomacy. I have approached the high-profile members of the ruling party, and tried to make deals, deals that will liberate you and I; deals that will answer the critical questions of access to basic rights like clean water, housing, sanitation, electricity, health care and education. But all in vain! In this democracy the poor are only used for voting. Once we have voted we are only lied to and undermined and ignored. So it is very critical that today we share the pain and suffering, the hard of the hardest, that we experience every day of our lives. I am going to talk about our level. We may be here at the university of the academics and students today, but we look like we are living on a different planet. In actual fact, we are living on the same planet, that is, the earth. But, we from *Abahlali* are living at the grassroot level, where there is no one below us. We are the poor of the poorest. Our lives are the ignored truth of this society. Some of our people are doing the cleaning at this university. They also have important things to say.

Comrades, hearing all the speakers talking about the so-called solidarity, it is clear to me that this solidarity is in fact 'verbal solidarity'. For instance, where are other social movements when the *Abahlali* are facing the arrest and detention by the police? Where is COSATU, where are the other social movements, when we

face police brutality, and when our children get burnt in the jondolos? Where is everyone when people with AIDS have to share one toilet with a thousand people and stand in long queues for water? Where is everyone? Verbal solidarity! Comrades, let's be careful.

However, let me extend our gratitude to all comrades who worked with us for the success of 27 February 2006, where an extensive political drama was being played out in front of the whole country, and the High Court of South Africa ruled in favour of the *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, defending our right to express ourselves through marching against Sutcliffe's attempts to ban us from marching. That was an important victory. Amandla!

Comrades, I am going to share with you the pain and suffering that we all go through, the pain and suffering in which we have no choice, except to fight back.

We who live in the jondolos of Durban, we democrats and loyal citizens of South Africa note that this country is rich because of the theft of our land and because of our work in the farms, mines, factories, kitchens, laundries of the rich. We cannot, and we will not, continue to suffer the way we do. Our voices cannot be stifled today like everyday. We brave heat, hunger, thirst, exhaustion and police repression. We have now had our day in court, we won recognition of our right to speak, we marched on the city, because now we are going to stand up for our rights, not only to speak, but to live, to breathe, to eat, to sleep, to work in dignity and safety. Today we demand adequate land and housing to live in safety, a healthy environment and with dignity. Today we demand the creation of well-paying and dignified jobs. Today we demand the right of all people in rented flats not to be evicted from their homes. Today we demand to genuine participation in genuine democratic processes so that we can make our own future. Today we demand safe and secure environments in which we can work, play and live. Today we demand that the fight against HIV and AIDS be given the seriousness it deserves. In view of this, today we demand well-resourced and staffed health facilities.

Today we cannot afford electricity, and today we demand that these services be made free to all the poor. Today we live without toilets or clean water; therefore, today we demand access to these basic human rights. If we are not given what a human being needs to survive while the city builds casinos and stadiums and theme parks we will have no choice but to take it. Those big projects, those casinos that make some few rich people richer are built with resources stolen from our future.

Today many people from around the city and the country are uniting in support of our struggle for genuine democracy and for basic human needs such as basic health care, clean water, electricity and housing. We would also like to give our support to our comrades involved in the same fight elsewhere. We have stood with, and we will continue to stand with our comrades in Chatsworth, Crossmore, Marianridge, Merebank, Shallcross, Clairwood and Wentworth in their fight against the eThekweni (Durban and surrounding areas) Municipality, in its attempt to evict them from their homes. We will also continue to stand with the

people of South Durban in their struggle against the environmental racism, the poor students facing exclusion from technikons and universities, and with comrades all over the country fighting for land, housing, work, education, health care and democratic development. We affirm that their struggle to resist evictions from their homes and win basic services is just. We also stand with our comrades in rural areas like eMandeni – we do not forget that rural areas are the biggest *jondolo*.

Today we demand answers. We have approached the municipality on many occasions and we have been promised that we will be allocated land, yet still we have no land. The municipality says it will house us. We demand to know when, we demand to know where, we demand to know how, we demand to know how many houses, we demand to know how long we have to be on the waiting list. We demand all this today.

We have fought and won, we have beaten Sutcliffe the city manager of Durban. Obed Mlaba, the Mayor of Durban, also tried to silence us but we would not go quietly. The police tied us up with helicopters and armoured cars and guns and we broke free and marched into the heart of the city. All around the city hall it was red that day. Today and every day, until the Government acts to the demands of the poor, we will raise our voices and we will fight for justice.

Comrades, while I am standing before you, in Umlazi, E Section, the day before yesterday, in the protest against the imposition of a councillor, against the repression of the freedom of the people and the will of the people, a 23-year-old woman, Monica Ngcobo, was shot dead. The *Abahlali baseMjondolo* throughout the whole country are watching Umlazi, and because God has always been on the side of the poor, it is our hope that justice shall triumph. Although we have been badly beaten and shot in all the numerous marches that we have had, we have never experienced loss of life like what happened in Umlazi. Therefore we extend our condolences to the people of Umlazi, E Section and other comrades around the country as we mourn. We will march with them and stand with them. We know that this struggle will also be long. We will walk the road with the Umlazi comrades for as long as it must be walked.

Comrades, what we need to share with you today is that there is much more that we can learn from one another. As I was posing the question, where was Patrick Bond³ when we buried our 12-year-old child who was burnt to death in the shacks? We need to ask, for how long shall we experience these kinds of abuse? That is why today we are saying, Sekwane! Sekwanele! (Enough is enough!) Until our hands come together we shall not conquer. We need one another. What we can share today is that our masses speak volumes, that we can only win the struggle if we unite; unity is what will liberate this country. Without unity there is no hope. But unity must be real. It cannot be created from the top. It must be created in the middle of the struggle of the poor. That is where we must do our discussing and thinking and strategizing.

What we have learnt is that the Government currently in power, cannot understand isiZulu nor can they hear any English. We have tried isiXhosa, they

cannot understand isiXhosa. We have written letters, they the languages of pens, faxes and telephones. The only language that they can understand, guess what? Putting thousands of people on the streets. Amandla! It works, it worked for us, it may work for you. We must not waste time speaking languages that those high up don't understand. Our people are dying every day. The queues for water get longer every day. For the poor every day is an emergency – every day.

So what we have learnt from our experiences is that our masses speak volumes. It is all about numbers, it's all about masses; that's where our strength lies. But our masses are not just bodies without land and houses and bodies marching on the street. We can be poor materially, but we are not poor in mind. This is why we have the University of Kennedy Road, the University of Foreman Road and the University of *Abahlali baseMjondolo*. Some of the intellectuals understand that we think our own struggle. Others still don't understand this. Mlaba and Sutcliffe still don't understand this. So comrades, today, I appeal to you, that what we need to do, as part of our way forward to conquer this capitalist system, (because each second you turn your head, the capitalist system is there) is to unite and think and fight together where there poor are, where the poor live, where the poor suffer. In your working environment, just like in mine, just like for all of us, there comes the capitalist system. We need to think about this carefully. Each tree we shake, we find that the capitalist system is there. It is already designed to direct you, to direct me, to direct us all so let us think well and fight bravely to overcome it. Amandla!

Comrades, even if those of us here from the communities come from different communities living in different places and with different histories, we all live at the grassroot levels where we face electricity cut-offs, water disconnections, police brutality and so on. Peter Dwyer⁴ has spoken well about unemployment. He was talking about organizing the unorganized, organizing the unemployed people. Though many poor people have nobody to talk to or someone to listen to them, slowly the voice of the poor is getting louder and louder and it cannot be ignored. Slowly the unorganized are starting a big fight.

For the cause of the poor, *Abahlali baseMjondolo* has become the home for the homeless, the hope for the hopeless, the volume for the voices of the voiceless, both in rural areas and in the centre of big cities like Durban. There are many people who have no home, nobody to speak to and no one to listen to their plight. But we are here to make sure that the voices of the poor are heard and paid attention to. We are here to stand against injustice, against the inhumane attack on the poor.

So comrades, what I am going to suggest right now is that, since we are coming from different backgrounds, from different spectra of life and we have grown up in different environments, and from different walks of life, we should put all of those experiences and skills together. Putting that experience together will bring us something that is going to change this country into what we expect from liberation. We should not expect much right now, but we should focus on securing our basic needs first and build from there.

So comrades, without wasting any of your time, I would just like to share some strategic approaches and strategic ideas that one could adopt in order to proceed to fight injustice. Let us avoid extending SMS-solidarity, email solidarity and verbal solidarity. Instead let us fight side by side with each other. Let us face the police together. Let us think together in the jondolos and on the streets. Some of the intellectuals are already doing this. Let us also follow the example of some of the comrades who, when they cannot afford to physically be wherever they are needed, they have extended whatever support they can, either in the form of financial or moral support. The Foundation for Human Rights and the Freedom of Expression Institute gave us weapons so that we could fight Mlaba and Sutcliffe better. Let us come together, let us put our heads together, and I promise (like most of the speakers here have said, 'united we stand') that nothing shall conquer us if we stand together. But of course it is not the time to come and campaign about the movement and so on; the reality remains that people are suffering. So I would emphasize that we need to start working together and to start allowing each one of us to share their experiences and their ideas. Then we can build a movement that can really fight because it really grows from the people.

Our movement is home for the destitute, it is home for the hopeless, it is home for those who cannot afford anything, those who cannot afford to have their voices being heard anywhere else. So we should carefully and patiently give a chance to each one of us to express their experience and feelings knowing that some people are battling even to get a Rand to buy a tomato, to have their dinner. We must start by asking how we address the issues of day to day suffering? So comrades, it is time for us to say, enough is enough. Let us start implementing ideas, ideas that have been shared here.

All of the struggling communities here have very vibrant leaders who have stood in front of you during the time of darkness, happiness, threats of violence, threats of death, the hazards of detention and arrest. They will always stand for you. So what we therefore need to do is not for us to come and also stand in front of you and talk. You also need to be given a chance to say whatever you feel like. The only really clever thinking from a leader given trust by the poor, maybe like myself, maybe like yourself, is that instead of talking more, the leader should provide a platform for the people to talk. So let us therefore allow other people to share their experiences and ideas. Let us hear from everyone, especially those who are not normally confident to speak in a place like this.

Notes

1. This is an edited version of a transcribed speech presented at the Centre for Civil Society and Rosa Luxemburg Colloquium, 4 March 2006 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban. The full speech transcription is available at <http://www.abahlali.org/node/842>
2. An academic at the university of Kwa-Zulu Natal who was later fired in part for his work with *Abahlali*. His dismissal has led to an international campaign to defend the freedom of expression

in South African higher education. Media reports, petitions and transcripts of the case can be found at <http://fazel.shackdwellers.org/>

3. An academic at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal and the director of the Centre for Civil Society.
4. A researcher at the Cape Town NGO the Alternatives Information and Development Centre who had just given a presentation on unemployment.

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