

# Whose activism counts?

Last year Abahlali baseMjondolo in the Western Cape was strongly criticised by other activist organisations for calling a week-long strike. **Noor Nieftagodien** argues that such top-down disciplining removes the essence of activism, which is to contest ruling powers. He also contends that the anti-apartheid struggle shows us that there is no one blue-print for activism.

Last year a public row erupted between sections of civil society over Abahlali baseMjondolo's (ABM) call for a week-long strike of informal settlement dwellers in the Western Cape. This brought into sharp relief a long-simmering feud that has bedevilled relations between the protagonists in the dispute. The ensuing debate exposed sharp divisions over understandings and practices of activism.

Several political and strategic issues were raised, albeit often only implicitly. These included the orientation of civil society to the ANC and state, the character of local movements and the dependence of some of them on international donors, and the importance of building unity between African and coloured workers in the Western Cape.

Each of these requires detailed and critical engagement, but here I want to focus on only one key aspect: the claims made by organisations about what constitutes *correct* activism.

Movements and organisations

in making claims about correct activism assume that their brand of activism, which includes political programmes, strategies and tactics, is better than the ideas and practices of other organisations. This represents what one may term 'proprietary activism', that is, making a claim of ownership over a self-defined *ideal* form of activism. The result of this approach is to belittle other organisations and people's experiences of activism, rather than engaging in constructive, robust and critical, discussion about how to advance struggle against oppression and exploitation.

The local SACP's (South African Communist Party) response to ABM's call for a strike, which was accompanied by road blockades, was characterised by shrill condemnation. According to SALP's statement issued by the Brian Bunting District on 15 October 2010, the blockading of roads 'is anarchy and reactionary', a serious accusation that was followed by a brief lesson of how to 'direct struggles'.

The SACP's belief that it had the authority to instruct a local mass movement on how to execute its campaigns and struggles seemed to come from the SALP's belief, as it said in the press statement, that it is 'the *vanguard* (my emphasis) of the working class and the poor'.

There appears to have been a concerted campaign to discredit ABM's call for a strike because a few days prior to the SACP's intervention a coalition of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), Social Justice Coalition, Equal Education and Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) in Khayelitsha issued a more detailed critique of the call for a strike.

Although these organisations articulated a qualitatively different approach to struggle than that offered by the SACP, they also mounted a surprisingly ruthless attack on ABM.

Their statement of 12 October 2010 said the call for a general strike 'is immature, ignorant and shows contempt for our communities. The poor

and working-class people of Khayelitsha cannot advance their struggle in this way'. 'We know,' they stated, 'that mindless violence and chaos have never brought freedom, decent jobs and a better life.'

This unfortunate caricature of ABM's struggles was then counterpoised with an apparently alternative form of activism: 'Freedom and social equality comes through patient organisation, education and sustained struggle. It comes through building the collective power of communities.' And, driving home their point these organisations concluded that, 'Abahlali's false militancy divides the poor and working class and weakens organisation and *real* (my emphasis) struggle.'

There were differences between the above statements but they were united in their criticisms of ABM's plan to embark on disruptive actions and in their claims to have a better understanding of activism and struggle.

ABM countered these criticisms by reminding its detractors that it had attempted over many years to get the state to listen to its grievances: 'We did not come quickly or lightly to the decision that it was necessary to cause disorder in order to force the government to take us seriously.' It argued that 'the road blockade is the strike of the unemployed' and that it 'is legitimate to create a short period of disorder, just like a strike at a work place does, as a tactic of struggle.'

Importantly, ABM claimed that its activism derived from its location among the poor and marginalised: 'We are a movement of, for and by the poor. We therefore have to struggle where we are and with what we have.' The movement also defended its autonomy, insisting that, 'We will not be intimidating (sic)

into accepting that only donor funded organisation know how to struggle properly.'

#### COMMENT

What this exchange revealed was two approaches to activism that have imprinted themselves on our political landscape, and that have contributed to the persistence of what seems like an unbridgeable divide among activists.

On the one hand, the SACP and the rest of the Alliance (SACP-Cosatu-ANC) continue to play an important role in shaping the ways in which activism is imagined and practised. Although the ruling party for nearly two decades, the ANC still argues that it is the authentic bearer of historical traditions of activism in South Africa.

But the activism propagated by the main parties in the Alliance represents only one form of activism developed over many years in the struggle against apartheid. In this framework the defining attributes of an activist are discipline and adherence to a line, which is influenced heavily by the traditions of the SACP.

It is an activism infused with hierarchical politics, that is, of adherence to a line developed in the upper echelons of the SALP. It is also the kind of practice that has transferred itself rather effortlessly into the state, where former activists are now subjected to the discipline of the state.

This exercise of disciplining removes from activism some of its essential characteristic, namely, of being critical and disrupting hegemonic powers. In this context the local SACP cadres' opposition to disruptions of the state in Khayelitsha is understandable.

But there is of course more than a grain of opportunism in the SACP's position, as they seem to have forgotten the leading role played by SACP members in the

Khutsong demarcation struggle. Also Cosatu affiliates continuously engage in strike action, which, as ABM points out, are designed to disrupt the normal functions of those who are in power. Last year's major public sector strike did precisely that and was directed against the state. Moreover, thousands of workers uttered more than a few homely truths to those who are in power.

On the other hand, since the late 1990s a range of new social movements have emerged that have articulated and practised forms of activism defined by a non-hierarchical approach of political engagement, of promoting disruption, 'speaking truth to power', mobilising mass action and attempting, even if with uneven success, to create spaces where poor communities can define their own politics and repertoires of struggle.

Inspired by international anti-neo-liberal struggles and the anti-apartheid movement these social movements used novel forms of struggle such as direct action, land and housing occupations. Many of the activists in these movements have only marginal connections to the ANC, or any other party for the matter. Others are explicitly contemptuous of party politics.

These movements are not without their problems as has been debated in the pages of *SALB*. Nevertheless, they have contributed significantly to the creation of spaces in which ordinary citizens, the majority of whom retain varying degrees of loyalty to the ANC but who also feel increasingly betrayed and alienated by it, can speak openly and critically to the ruling party.

These movements, for example the Anti-Privatisation Forum, ABM and the Anti-Eviction Campaign, have been in the forefront of mobilising campaigns against the privatisation of public goods (especially water and electricity),

for decent housing, in defence of land occupations, and against the growth of clientelism and patronage politics in the state that has resulted in widespread and debilitating corruption.

Coinciding with the growth of these movements has been the emergence of what has been called social justice movements, which shared many of the characteristics of the social movements but were also distinctive in important respects. Some of these social justice movements launched campaigns around specific rights-based issues, while others utilised the law against powerful institutions, including the government and corporations that they saw in their policies or actions were undermining the country's constitution.

Whereas new social movements

have typically in their rhetoric positioned themselves as anti-ANC, local social justice movements have tended to cultivate a critical orientation to the ANC Alliance. The most significant example of this kind of movement is the TAC, which waged a successful campaign that combined advocacy, legal strategy and community mobilisation for access to anti-retrovirals in the struggle to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

In reality, both the new social and social justice movements have contributed critically to the constitution of activism in our new democracy. They have drawn on past, albeit sometimes different, experiences and memories of the struggle against apartheid in this process.

A lesson worth recalling from that struggle is that there is no single blue-print of activism.

Patient building of movements cannot be counter posed with the various struggles emanating from poor and marginalised communities. These forms of activism have never been mutually exclusive.

One may argue that the execution of successful struggle in the present and future will depend, firstly, on finding the appropriate critical articulation between these different forms of activism and, secondly, by dispensing with hierarchical politics that seeks to discipline challenges to power. ■

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