

INTERVIEW

Building the Frantz Fanon School: an interview with Mqapheli Bonono

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SUMMARY

This short excerpt from a much longer interview with Mqapheli Bonono, the current deputy president of Abahlali baseMjondolo, discusses the building of the Frantz Fanon School in Durban and the movement's evolving approach to political education. Bonono reflects on how lessons drawn from Brazil's Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) informed Abahlali baseMjondolo's efforts to organise political education work amid the pressures of an often intense struggle. He describes how, for a time, it became a valuable node in the movement's political education work despite extremely difficult circumstances. Bonono also recounts his experience of imprisonment, including the formation of a reading group.

KEYWORDS

Abahlali baseMjondolo; Durban; social movements; South Africa

Introduction

Formed in Durban on 4 October 2005, Abahlali baseMjondolo currently has over 180,000 members organised into 104 branches across four of South Africa's nine provinces. The movement is primarily rooted in established urban shack settlements and newer urban land occupations, including those developed into communes, but includes some rural branches.

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From the outset the movement took political education, understood as a process premised on mutual learning, seriously. There was an immediate and strong interest in Frantz Fanon. While the movement's initial educational practices were not inspired by Paulo Freire, they had a clear resonance with the commitment to mutuality central to Freire's thought, and Freire was later taken up. The experience of paternalism — of being treated, as people often said, like children by the African National Congress (ANC) — generated a strong aversion to the often racialised non-governmental organisation (NGO) paternalism common at the time.

While there was, in the early days of the movement, a clear sense of the need to affirm what was called 'a politics of the poor', critique of the ANC often drew on its own language and history. Drawing from the idea of Robben Island as a university, the movement audaciously declared the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo and began a programme of political discussions, sometimes with invited speakers and including all-night discussions known as 'camps'.¹ This programme, operating across branches and a shifting set of centralised spaces, has continued for 20 years. Successfully hosting political education workshops is a precondition for launching a branch.

In 2015, members of the movement began to participate in the Florestan Fernandes National School of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Guararema near São Paulo, Brazil. This experience led the current deputy president of the movement, Mqapheli Bonono (also known as George), to lead efforts to establish political schools as purpose-built structures in new occupations. New occupations made it possible to plan collectively for the construction of shared infrastructure, including halls, kitchens, creches and gardens.

Today the idea of the commune is central to the movement's aspirations, and building and running political schools is an important part of the process of turning occupations into communes. The process of building communes — democratically self-managed communities in which, among other principles and practices, there is no renting or selling of land and shacks — is much easier when people have collectively committed to the movement prior to the moment of occupation.

The eKhenana occupation in Cato Crest, Durban, had chaotic origins when the land was first occupied in August 2018 and, as Bonono stresses in this interview, sharp differences of opinion and internal conflict on the question of the commodification of land. It faced severe and violent repression from the municipality, police and local party gangsters, including repeated destruction of homes, assaults, arrests and assassinations. Ayanda Ngila was assassinated on 8 March 2022, Nokuthula Mabaso on 5 May 2022 and Lindokuhle Mnguni on 8 August 2023.² Nonetheless, remarkable progress was made in building a working and productive commune.

The Frantz Fanon School was built in eKhenana in 2020 and swiftly became a vibrant space that drew in members of the movement from across its branches, as well as people from other organisations and movements, including the movement against the monarchy in Swaziland and people from as far away as Ghana, the Caribbean, Brazil and the United States. The curriculum ranged from discussions of figures such as Fanon to popular history, the experiences of other movements and line-by-line collective readings of *The Communist Manifesto*.

After years of repression resulting in profound trauma and, in some cases, debilitating paranoia, the commune reached a crisis point in October 2024 when the surviving leadership wished to sustain membership of the movement but refused to hold an election as required by the movement's rules. Two factions emerged, one just a handful of people and the other much larger and including a clear majority of the residents. Both factions made serious allegations against the other. The branch was unable to sustain membership of the movement without holding an election and in this period of limbo the School was no longer used in the same way. Its physical structure began to rot after heavy rains and flooding and eventually had to be dismantled as it was unsafe and children were using it for shelter from the sun and rain.

After a request from a majority of residents to intervene, the movement's national leadership organised a process of healing beginning in November 2024 and, with the support of the overwhelming majority of residents, the branch restored its membership of the movement by electing a council in July 2025. Schools in other occupations and communes are flourishing, and there are now plans to rebuild the School in eKhenana, but all political infrastructure – material and social – built on occupied land is inevitably precarious.

Richard Pithouse: Let's talk about eKhenana and the building of the commune and the Fanon school.

Mqapheli Bonono: Lindo [Lindokuhle Mnguni] and comrades from eKhenana came in 2018 when we were facing infiltration into the movement by the ANC offering VBS [Venda Building Society] money. On the day on which the leadership were recalled, the day that the leadership structure was dissolved by the members at the General Assembly, they were the marshals making sure that nobody brought weapons into the hall. The ANC thought that they were going to capture the movement so there was a risk that they could respond with violence. eKhenana had not yet formed a branch, they were still knocking to join Abahlali, so they were independent.

In 2017 land was occupied to form the eNkanini occupation in Cato Crest and I started sharing what I had learned in Brazil from the MST. As soon as they started to occupy the land they created gardens, but as an individual practice. We moved towards developing a bigger communal garden and building a community hall.

We won a court interdict to stop the demolitions yet the police continued to demolish homes, and then the court instructed the municipality's lawyers and Abahlali's lawyers to go back to the community, to return people to their places and to number each home. During that process I marked the land for the community hall. We put up a pole that was given a number by the municipality and therefore protected by the court order. The hall was also going to be a political school.

While we were fighting a huge struggle to hold the land in eNkanini I heard that a new occupation was starting nearby. That was eKhenana.

Some of the people struggling for land in eNkanini wanted to be landlords. You cannot sell or rent land or homes in the movement, so they left eNkanini to join eKhenana, which was not organised at that time. People were just coming.

In 2018 we were invited to go to eKhenana and give a presentation on the movement. Thapelo [Mohapi – the movement's general secretary] was keen but I was reluctant because we knew that some of the occupiers wanted to privatise the land.

I thought that we must be careful not to be fooled. But Thapelo persuaded me and we went.

On the first day two comrades came up through the bush and took us down to the occupation. It was a steep hill. When we reached the bottom there were more than 200 people. There was only one big house. They explained that they had built a few houses there, six or eight, but the councillor had come and burnt them down and so they decided to build one big place, with a room for the women and a room for the men.

They had a big fire and a pot and were cooking and eating together. Then I did the presentation on the movement, on our politics, how we work, the process to join. I told them straight that if they wanted to join they would have to stop the selling of land, that it is against our principles, that we can't defend an occupation if people are occupying to sell or rent land, that this is a communist movement, that if you want to join you need make your choice together. There was a fight between them, a disagreement.

And then Lindo spoke, he asked a powerful question, in his quiet way: 'when we occupy land, what do we want the land for, how do we want to use the land?' This is the first time I noticed this young man.

That same day, after we left, the municipality came and demolished the settlement again.

In November we were invited to do a second presentation and we saw that they had cleared the bush and now had 20 houses, and that the occupation was carefully planned, not like it is now but with the houses far apart from each other. There was lots of space. We allowed them to become members but explained that they could not launch a branch and that we would not rush to court until we were confident that we were working with the right people, that we cannot defend landlords.

I went home for the holiday in December and while I was there the municipality demolished the whole [eKhenana] settlement. Thapelo really pushed me and we went to court on 26 December. The court ruled that the municipality must stop demolishing and the residents must stop building – the site must all remain as it is. A court date was set for February 2019.

When I came back to Durban I went to eKhenana to meet Lindo. He smiled and revealed to me that, 'look, there's a problem. We heard you clearly when you were giving us the vision, the mission. ... Now others are against that. They are putting in their own plots. That is against the principles you presented to us.' So, there was a disagreement between themselves.

We went back to court, and we won. The court instructed us to go and put the people back. That's when Mkhize from the [Municipal] Land Invasion Unit came and started shooting with his pistol, and [ANC] ward councillor Mzimuni Ngiba started moving through the whole of Mayville with a loudhailer telling people to go and take the land. People rushed to take land.

When we went back to the occupation with our lawyers there was a big fight, the police were hitting everyone. We had to show the court papers and insist that we had a right to be there. Each person had to stand at their places. Lindo was the one organising people to stand at their place.

I advised him that during the night they must build as quickly as possible. The municipality came back in the morning and wanted to put numbers on the shacks. They said that people could only have the land under their shacks, from one wall

to the other, but Lindo said no. He showed them the whole occupation: the occupation with the land around the shacks, the land that would give people space, the land we would use for the hall, the gardens and everything. He showed them where the land for eKhenana started and where it finished. There was a big argument and then they left.

A few days later Lindo and others came to meet me. They requested that I go back to the occupation and do the presentation about the movement again, and to print copies of the movement's statements of its positions. While I was organising the copies I saw Lindo standing in our library and he had Steve Biko's book in his hands. I heard him call Ayanda [Ngila – a resident of the occupation] and say 'this is the book!' He asked if he could borrow the book, and of course I told him he was welcome but that he would have to sign it out, agree to the return date and get a receipt.

I saw something in this guy, the smile on him when he was getting this book!

We talked a little more about the movement, about our politics, our principles, our praxis, and after that he did not go to bed without calling me, asking for clarification or something. I noticed that he was doing a lot of research, a lot of reading.

He also wanted to know about real politics, practical politics. He knew I had been a guest of the MST in Brazil and would ask me a lot of questions, like can you tell us about the Mística, can you come and share with us the best of what you have learned?

He called me to eKhenana. He had collected all the people in a meeting under the big tree, there was no garden there then, and they started interrogating me about the MST, asking what the movement does. He was doing his own research on MST too, and on other radical intellectuals and movements.

I presented what I had learned, what I had seen in Brazil. He asked me what they could implement in eKhenana. I told them that if we want to reproduce what the MST has done in Brazil we need to ask ourselves the question Lindo had asked: why do we occupy land, how do we understand the relations between a community and the land, how do we understand community, what do we want to do with the land? I told them if we wanted to put our politics in practice we needed to farm the land communally, to produce for everyone to be able to eat, and to eat healthy food, and to produce a surplus for the benefit of the community. Ultimately, we need to build a commune, this is how we make our vision real.

He told me that they would surprise me, that they had been studying and discussing the movement's vision for four days and that they were clear.

In the same week, I was organising a cadre development workshop in eNkanini and I invited the eKhenana people. They enjoyed the workshop and Lindo asked me to run a similar workshop in eKhenana. We don't bring a programme. We go to listen, to hear what the comrades want to learn. So we sat with them and listened. After they had told us what they wanted we planned a two-day workshop and held it under the tree. That's when Lindo explained that they wanted to open a political school.

Now I was really interested in this guy, so I asked him more about himself. He told me that he was inspired by Steve Biko in high school. He was doing history at school, he was reading [Oliver] Tambo, Karl Marx, a lot of Malcolm X. He was obsessed with

politics. He did his high school right here in Mayville, and he was involved in a struggle at the school. I said that it was good that he had the experience of a struggle in school and asked him if he had comrades around him now who were willing to learn, to build and run a school. He said, 'look at these young women, they have already taken the decision about what the land is going to be used for.'

It was clear that building the political school was a priority. They had no money, of course, especially after having to rebuild after evictions. I was able to get a little money. Some comrades felt that it was too early, that we should wait for the issues in the occupation to be resolved, but after the workshop I was clear that we must support these comrades. I knew that if we wanted to support the comrades in eKhenana to build a community we had to create a space for them to meet, to be together, and to create the school for them to learn together.

They were now ready to launch their branch. They had a big launch. Lindo was elected as the chairperson. When they slaughtered a cow it was a real celebration. They were so happy that they were now full members of Abahlali.

When I delivered the news to Lindo that we had the money to build the Frantz Fanon School, wow, the look on him! He just threw that smile on me! We first built it from pallets, with a concrete floor. The doors that we used for the ceiling came later.

While we were busy working, laying the concrete, Lindo just smiled at me. He said, 'hey, we've got a kitchen.' They already had the shop. S'bu [Zikode, a co-founder of the movement and its current president] arrived, we sat down, all of us, in a circle. Lindo started looking at S'bu and myself. He was shocked that we were all eating together. He said, 'but you are the president and the deputy president and you are actually sitting and eating here with us.' This is not how politics works in South Africa, even in NGOs the bosses often eat separately. Absorbing this, Lindo said, 'this is socialism, this movement is our home.' He said it twice. From that day there was never a day where we didn't see each other face to face.

S'bu was so happy. He said, 'wow, the MST has really inspired you with their political education.' I agreed. When I was growing up I did not get an opportunity to be in school properly, but through our movement, and then through the MST, I really got to learn, and to learn the knowledge of resistance not oppression. Now I'm going to share my knowledge with all the comrades, continue to learn from my comrades and create ways for us all to learn more together.

Then Covid-19 came in March 2020, just as we built the Frantz Fanon School. We had to move fast to start providing food to members who were going hungry. Each branch managed a list of people who were really in need. When we took food to eKhenana there was a discussion, of course, and Lindo thanked the movement and said that they had followed the request from the office to make the list, but that he must tell us that their kitchen was operating and they eat together, nobody goes to eat in their shack. The food would be taken to the kitchen and they would all cook and eat together.

He explained that, the day before, the women had started building the structures and fencing the space to rear chickens and harvest eggs. We were impressed. I went to the kitchen and I found that they didn't have a stove. They were cooking on the floor, with fire. I was able to arrange for the movement to buy a gas hot plate for the kitchen, two gas bottles, four big pots, knives, cups and spoons.

What we had wanted to implement in eNkanini was achieved in eKhenana. I had visited the rural communes in Brazil, now the comrades in eKhenana were building an urban commune. People were really committed. We realised that it was a priority to open a path for Lindo to more education, that we need to give him all possible opportunities for education.

Richard Pithouse: When did the MST bring the seeds?

Mqapheli Bonono: That was later in 2020. They first planted beans. They harvested three 50-kilogramme sacks. They bought a whole lot of produce to the movement office to say thank you. They were coming with big boxes. They said ‘look, this is healthy food, this is organic food, this is what we want.’

They told us that they had produced enough food to make sure that everyone in the occupation could eat well and to sell through the cooperative shop and make a profit. They said that they had noticed in the general assembly that the movement needed its own sound system and they had brought a sound system for the movement with the profit from the garden.

S’bu and I, well, we nearly fell in tears. When they left we went outside to talk and we agreed that the movement was moving in the right direction. I really started to enjoy sitting with Lindo. He had no time for gossip and all that shit. He would talk about the international struggles. He would talk about Thomas Sankara, he loved Sankara. I started asking our comrades in other countries to add him to their international WhatsApp groups. When important links were shared I would print the articles and take them to him.

He asked me for an MST flag so next time I went to Brazil I brought him a flag. The next time I went to eKhenana the flag was hanging in the tree. He was really a strong cadre, and Ayanda, those two guys were very, very close. Always sitting and discussing, analysing.

Then in 2020 the arrests started. Lindo and Ayanda first. I was in Mpumalanga the day they got arrested, running a workshop. Calls were coming in like hell from eKhenana. I could sense something was happening. I called back. I couldn’t get through to Lindo. I called his girlfriend. She told me that the police came and shot Landu [Shazi] and arrested him, that they couldn’t find Lindo and Ayanda.

We came back late at night, we couldn’t find them. I tried to sleep. The next day we went to KwaKito [the Cato Manor police station] but the police said they were not there. I was worried that they had killed them. But I noticed that the police were saying to each other, ‘this is Bonono.’ They were pointing at me, discussing me while sending me from pillar to post. So, I thought to myself, no, I have to change my face. I said that I was demanding to see Landu. They told me that he was in hospital.

Nobody wanted to answer me about Lindo and Ayanda, but one cop quietly told me that they had Lindo in the Sydenham police station thinking that the comrades would come to KwaKito to demand his release if they knew he was there.

I went to Sydenham and they said, ‘George, are you looking for your guy?’ I said yes. They said he was running, that he’s dangerous. Then they said, ‘fuck it, go inside.’ I went into the holding cells. Lindo told me they were going to charge him with murder.

When the sun comes up in Cato Manor on the weekends there are always bodies. It’s very easy to make an arrest on a murder charge when there are always bodies.

He didn't smoke but I quickly bought him cigarettes.

I had to leave him. The next day, the third day since the arrest, he appeared in court. He was denied bail and taken away. Ayanda was taken inside too. They were denied bail twice more and kept in Westville prison for six months.

When they were taken to the prison we called a meeting. We needed have all the facts. Of course, the media repeated what the police were telling them. The story was everywhere: 'Abahlali baseMjondolo leaders arrested for murder'. We had the meeting to find out what was going on. We met in the office to be safe.

After that meeting the cops came to the office and I was arrested and charged with conspiracy to murder. They told the court that I called the meeting to plan to kill the witnesses. I knew why I had been arrested. It was because of all the support for the occupation.

Richard Pithouse: When you appeared in court the prosecutor said you were a very dangerous person.

Mqapheli Bonono: Yes. Luckily, I was sent back to the holding cells. You and S'bu were able to get inside and visit me.

Richard Pithouse: Were you aware of all the people outside the court, the people that couldn't fit into the court room? There were hundreds. We always hope that the prisoners will see their comrades or hear them singing.

Mqapheli Bonono: Yes, I knew the comrades were there. The guards were all talking about it. It is very important for people to know that they are not alone. It makes a big difference.

I was denied bail and then appeared again and was denied again, and then I was taken to Westville. The judge had ruled that I must be kept in isolation but when I entered the prison there was a big noise. People were shouting 'Bonono has arrived!' They were really hostile. I was asking myself, how do they all know me?

Lindo and Landu found me quickly. They were surprised to see me there and asked me why I had been arrested when I was not living on the land. I told them that they must not be ashamed. I had made my choices. I knew the risks.

They told me that they had heard that I was going to be stabbed. They told me these guys who were waiting for me, to stab me, were from Msinga [a rural area in central KwaZulu-Natal]. They get arrested together, in groups, because of the fights there. Lindo made sure I had cigarettes.

It was my first time in prison, sleeping on the floor, the terrible food, waking up at two in the morning. I had to always be alert for the attack that was coming. There are damaged people there. People have been really broken by the system. They will fight for anything. You can't sleep. You can never sleep.

On the third day Lindo managed to find me again and he took me to his cell, straight away. It is much, much better being with your comrades. And they were my soldiers, making sure that nothing happened to me, caring for me. I could sleep.

We got that message to you asking for books and [name deleted] was able to get them inside. When the books were brought to me the whole cell started asking, 'who is this person?' The guys there have nothing, they get nothing. Prison is just full of poor people. We said these books are for everyone, you can all read. We started reading collectively and some of the other guys in the cell joined us.

Richard Pithouse: Reading together in MST style, line by line?

Mqapheli Bonono: Yes, the way I had learned at the MST school.

Richard Pithouse: Which books did you work through?

Mqapheli Bonono: When I was there it was mostly Fanon. We knew that Fanon took the thinking of oppressed people seriously, so we took him seriously. We were analysing our struggle, and the situation in the country, in a kind of conversation with Fanon.

We realised that prison is what you get if you try to build socialism. Lindo told us that actually we were lucky that they didn't kill us, that at least we were alive. We discussed how political prisoners have always made the prison a university. Being there is a lesson in itself in how the system works, in what it thinks of you as a human being, in how it moves to destroy any radical politics. But you can also make it a place for study, a place to study together.

But there's one thing for sure. I got incredible support from comrades around the world, from around Africa. We got a phone, we started seeing all the videos, the statements. The prison bosses saw it too. The head of the prison came to the cell to check on me, to greet me, to ask me how my guys are, if we need anything. When he walked out all the other guys in the cell were asking what's going on. Lindo was just laughing.

Now we were interacting with comrades outside too. That makes it easier. But the one person I avoided on the phone was my wife. I was really worried about her. That was hurting me a lot. She collapsed when I was denied bail and it was really hurting me.

When I came out there was a lot of support, a lot of singing. But there was an element that was hurting me too. Someone in the meeting in the office had agreed to say that I had called the meeting to plan a murder, someone had agreed to work with our enemy.

But coming out from the dock into the passage, seeing S'bu, seeing you guys, all that support, I felt strong. Knowing that the movement had got me a really good advocate, had got me out. That makes you feel strong too. But my wife, she cried. And when I saw my younger sister she just reminded me of my mother ... I saw that my father was not there and I was very worried about him.

But then when I got outside, seeing all the comrades there, hundreds of people, it gave me strength. I could see that there are real comrades with me and that we can wage the fight against capitalism, against these corrupt politicians, we can wage it together.

When I had to address the comrades outside the court I was not prepared. I had nothing to tell them other than to say, look, I just went to university. I could not go to the other university. I went to this university and I have learned a lot of lessons. I know how hard life is inside the prison. I know the struggle that so many poor people are facing inside. A lot of people have been thrown in there without any evidence being brought against them, without any charges. Everywhere in the world, prisons are full of poor people.

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This is an edited excerpt from a much longer interview with Mqapheli Bonono carried out over three days in July 2024. The full interview will be published by Daraja Press.

Notes

1. For an account of the movement's early years that takes its intellectual life seriously, see Gibson (2011). For a more recent account of the movement that also takes its thinking seriously, see Al-Bulushi (2024).
2. The Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI), Abahlali baseMjondolo's primary lawyers, have produced the most detailed account of the key events in the movement's history, including the repression it has endured. See Masiangoako (2022).

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

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