

Abahlali baseMjondolo

Speeches and Writings

Volume Three

2014–2026





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4 October 2005 – 4 October 2026 · Twenty-one years of struggle

This is one of eight volumes that together collect the statements, memoranda, speeches and writings of Abahlali baseMjondolo, from the struggles that led to its founding on 4 October 2005 to its twenty-first anniversary on 4 October 2026.

This volume collects speeches, lectures, essays, interviews and other writings by members of Abahlali baseMjondolo, compiled from the archive at abahlali.org and from other publications. They are reproduced as they were given or first published, in the order of their dates.

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12 MARCH 2014

Essay · S'bu Zikode

The poor are punished for demanding our constitutional rights

Published in the Daily Maverick

The word 'democracy' has often been misunderstood. It has been misused to legitimise certain projects in a way that is incorrect and misleading. For many shack dwellers and other poor people in South Africa, democracy has meant free corruption for members of the ruling party, a life mired in the mud and fire of shacks, illegal evictions and forced removals to transit camps.

For the eThekweni Municipality, democracy means that they are a law unto themselves and can act in total disregard of the rule of law. The poor are automatically viewed as criminals even when we act within the law. For those of us who have organised to defend the dignity of the poor, democracy has come to mean death threats, torture, arrest, violence and assassination.

This has been evident in Cato Crest in Durban between September 2013 and January 2014. Violence from the ruling party is worse in Durban than in other cities, but state violence is everywhere in South Africa. The Marikana Land Occupation in East Philippi in Cape Town has been met with state violence just like the Marikana Land Occupation in Cato Crest. Everywhere in South Africa the state is unaccountable to poor people and tries to control us with violence.

The ruling party has worked hard to make sure that housing is only allocated to its members and their friends and families and to exclude those who are critical of them as a punishment. Evictions are political; only those who are not loyal members of the ruling party are having their homes illegally destroyed without court orders. In Lamontville, residents of Madlala Village who went to the Constitutional court on 12 February 2014 were told by local party structures and their councillor that their shacks would be demolished if they brought any party other than the ANC to the settlement.

A day after the Constitutional Court heard their appeal, the eThekweni Land Invasion Unit were instructed to demolish all the shacks in Madlala Village. This

was a form of punishment for taking government to Constitutional court. In 2009, we were attacked and driven from our homes by armed members of the ruling party. The police refused to come to our aid. This was also a punishment for taking the government to the Constitutional Court.

It is not just housing that is corrupted. The ruling party has worked hard to make sure that only its loyal members benefit through the tender system and employment through Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP). In Durban this is evident in the Kennedy Road, the Forman Road and Cato Crest settlements.

Local councillors have become gangsters and hit men during the night. They only act as leaders during the day and to impress the public. We have seen this in KwaNdengezi near Marianhill and in Cato Crest.

The politicians and the rich are trying to divide the poor. In Durban, Xhosa speaking residents have been told to 'go back to Lusikisiki' by senior politicians in the ruling party. Those who are from neighbouring countries are told to return back to their respective countries because they are taking jobs from South Africans. Sometimes it is said that they are taking girlfriends from South Africans. And xenophobia in this democracy does not only come from senior politicians. We all remember the attacks on people born in other countries in 2008. Now some rich businessmen in Durban are trying to tell poor Africans that our real oppressors are Indians.

Democracy from above is working very well for the members of the ruling party and their friends and families. For the rest of society it is a new form of oppression. In fact it has become a crisis. People are protesting everywhere.

There is a danger that this crisis will cause some people to give up on democracy. There are now lots of forces including NGOs, political parties and businessmen looking for tenders that want to capture the anger of the poor for their own purposes. It is clear that most of these forces want to use the poor as ladders and cannot be trusted. It is clear that the solution to this crisis is not to have different people use the poor as ladders. It is time to take the ladders away.

Abahlali believes that every person's humanity must be recognised and that every person's life and intelligence must count the same. We therefore believe in a democracy from below. We believe in democracy that comes with responsibility and dignity. We believe in democracy from below as a form of struggle and as a goal of struggle.

We believe in a democracy that allows general members to set an agenda without being forced to engage in an agenda already formulated to further someone's interest. We believe in leaders who are there to facilitate democratic decision-making. We want a responsive government that will cater for the needs of the people equally, starting with the worst off. We understand that this will only happen when the poor have organised to build their own power and to reduce the power of the politicians and other forces like business and NGOs.

We organise from below to fulfil and strengthen our voice. We organise in the dark and confined corners of our society so that we can move, together, out of the spaces where oppression wants to keep us. We protest peacefully in order to show our strength and to give voice to the oppressed.

We occupy land and struggle to defend land occupations because we need to start reducing the power of the rich and politicians to make all decisions about how land is allocated. People are alive now and their urgent needs have to be met now.

It will not be easy for democracy from below to replace democracy from above. It is clear that we will need to continue to risk our lives and to speak out in the mist of all the death threats and violence. We will need to not fear intimidation, violence and death. None of us can do this on our own. Our strength comes from our togetherness.

7 MAY 2014

Poem · Zama of Cato Crest

Izithembiso Ezingafezekanga

Salinda! Salinda!
 Ibinga elingaka sinomlando omngaka,
 kuthina inkululeko ayifikanga, sikhathele
 ilamaqabane azenza inkinga. Sicela inkululeko yethu ukuze
 nelokishi lethu liphenduke UMhlanga Rocks.
 Oyosikhulula siyomthanda njengo Rick Rocks
 Abazi umnotho, kuthina bekungakaveli lutho.
 Salinda! Salinda!
 Singabahlali bendawo
 Salinda! Salinda!
 Singabahlali bendabuko
 Salinda! Salinda!
 Singabahlali kulelizwe
 Kanti eyethu inkululeko sizoyithola nini?
 Mabe linde kuze kuse kanti kuyokusa nini?
 Iminyaka engamashumi amambili,
 Eyethu Inkululeko asikayitholi namanje,
 Eyethu intuthuko asikayitholi namanje
 Salinda! Salinda!
 Singabahlali bendawo
 Salinda! Salinda!
 Singabahlali bendabuko
 Salinda! Salinda!
 Singabahlali kulelizwe
 Lapho sokhululeka lolosuku kuyoba olomgubho,
 Lapho kokhala imbomu,
 uZama uyophakama nombhobho ahaye enye inkondlo.
 Ngoba loko kobe kusitshengisa ukuthi sizindlondlo,
 Futhi soyilungela eyethu indondo
 Inkululeko yethu bayikhomba umkhondo.
 Kushunqe iyinhliziyi kuphenduke indlu yesonto,
 Kodwa ekugcineni uyosebenza umvuzo
 Salinda! Salinda!
 IBHALWE UZAMA WASE CATO CREST

8 MAY 2014

Interview · S'bu Zikode

Why Abahlali endorsed the DA: S'bu Zikode speaks to GroundUp

GroundUp, interview by Sibusiso Tshabalala, May 2014

On 2 May 2014 Abahlali baseMjondolo (ABM) –a social movement of shack dwellers– endorsed the Democratic Alliance (DA) for the 2014 general elections. Abahlali baseMjondolo are better known for their protests against unlawful evictions and their advocacy for public housing and urban land for the poor. Sibusiso Tshabalala of GroundUp spoke to S'bu Zikode, leader of Abahlali baseMjondolo, to find out why they took this decision.

GroundUp (GU): Abahlali's politics are fundamentally different to that of the DA. Why did you decide to endorse the DA?

S'bu Zikode (SZ): We [ABM members] have suffered under the ANC's rule. The ANC has consistently demonstrated that it lacks the political will to take the issues of the poor seriously. Being a shack dweller is similar to being imprisoned. The only difference is that a prison sentence can be short-lived, but when you're poor and have no guarantee of upward mobility, living in a shack can be a life sentence. How long should we, the poor, be confined to this shack sentence?

Here in Durban, many of our comrades continue to be assaulted by the ANC. We fear for our lives and assassination attempts are the order of the day.

As a movement of the urban poor, we think our priority is to vote out the ANC. We do not agree with the DA fundamentally on many core issues. This decision is not one that is based on ideology. Poor people do not eat ideology, nor do they live in houses that are made out of ideology.

So for this decision, we have decided to suspend ideology for a clear goal: weaken the ANC, guarantee the security and protection of the shack dwellers.

GU: The 'Sidikiwe! Vukani! Vote No' campaign is also advocating for a weakened ANC. Wouldn't that have been the most appropriate channel, if your primary goal is to weaken the ANC?

SZ: As you might know, Abahlali has always had a 'No Vote' campaign of its own. Leaders of the Sidikiwe! Vukani! Campaign approached us for our support. We respect their efforts but we think it's a little too late for a 'No Vote' campaign.

When we championed the idea of a 'No Vote', we never received much support. Now that, they [the proponents of the Sidikiwe! Vukani! campaign] are angry, we [Abahlali] must join?

We want to weaken the ANC, hence our endorsement of the DA. But ultimately, this endorsement is tied by demands from Abahlali that the DA will have to honour.

GU: The interesting aspect to this endorsement is that it goes against Abahlali's long-held view that electoral politics are doomed. Have you regained hope in electoral politics?

SZ: We have never said that electoral politics are doomed. Our view has only been that the politics of the poor and working class must be the politics of our society. Electoral politics are constricted; narrow interests often influence them.

I think if we are to advance the politics of the poor and working class, we will have to build inside and outside of the electoral space. Abahlali has built a people's democracy outside of electoral politics. We have affirmed the agency and autonomy of the poor. We have built a politics of dignity, not a politics of power.

GU: In the Western Cape, where the DA governs, residents of the Philippi Settlement have been repeatedly evicted unlawfully over the past two years. While I appreciate the pragmatism in your decision to back the DA, isn't this a stark contradiction? To endorse a party that acts in the same way the ANC does?

SZ: I should have been clearer. Our endorsement of the DA does not mean that we are now members of the DA. Joining a political party means that you agree — broadly — with its policy positions.

Endorsing a party is different. It means you look at the political landscape and say, "Where is my backing going to make a difference?"

Now, you're right. The DA in the Western Cape is not angelic. Our comrades at the Marikana settlement in Philippi have also faced the might of the City of Cape Town's shameful land invasion unit.

The difference though [between the DA and the ANC] is that the DA engages with us courteously. They recognize that we are human beings. In Durban,

the ANC has been unable to engage with Abahlali meaningfully. Violence and arrogance characterize the attitude of the ANC to the poor.

If you meet a DA councillor working in the eThekweni council, he/she will not ask you for a membership card.

The ANC here in Durban uses membership cards as currency — a membership card will get you ten places ahead on the housing list. It might even get you the attention of your local ward councillor.

In our discussions with the DA, we have raised the Western Cape issue, and we have been guaranteed that the approach will change.

GU: Is the endorsement restricted to Abahlali's KZN constituency, or is this a national endorsement?

SZ: The agreement we have signed with the DA is specific to the KZN. However, Abahlali baseMjondolo as a countrywide organization endorses the DA for the general elections.

We have consulted with our comrades in the Western Cape and we've been very conscious not to force this onto them. This is why Abahlali in Cape Town will be meeting with the DA that side to sign an agreement.

GU: Will this agreement be similar to the one you signed this past Friday?

SZ: Yes. This will be a similar agreement, but tailored to Abahlali in the Western Cape. We expect to meet with the DA on Monday or later in the week to finalize the Western Cape agreement.

GU: Wouldn't political parties like the EFF, APC or WASP been a more likely choice for endorsement? Their policy positions mildly represent Abahlali's aspirations.

SZ: We have engaged with the EFF. We are very clear on our position to them and others. Our move to endorse the DA does not dismiss our commitment to the politics of the left.

This decision is a tactical one. Tactics lies in acknowledging that if the left is going to have a real political future in South Africa, the ANC must fall. Now, is the EFF a significant opposition party to ensure that this happens?

Endorsing the DA is a means to that end. The EFF is still new, and while there might be agreement on some issues, we have not seen what they're capable of. We have said to the EFF, "Allow us to endorse the DA for this election. We are vulnerable and you [the EFF] are unable to assist."

GU: You endorsing the DA does not aid the poor and the working class though?

SZ: It does. I think it's important to note that we have thought long and hard about this decision. We are the poor and we know our struggles. Equally so, we also know when something is favourable to our cause.

It's been interesting to note the disappointment from people who have never really supported or identified with our struggles. The same people now criticize us for our decision. Do they enjoy it when our lives are endangered? Do they enjoy it when our children grow up in flea-infested slums?

We understand our pain and we have agency. Analysts and commentators don't. We do not have to impress anyone but ourselves. I think that should be the starting point, the acknowledgement that poor people have agency and are capable of making their own decisions.

GU: *Many people are curious to know what the terms of the endorsement are. Can you share some of the terms with us?*

SZ: Our agreement with the DA is not a secret one. We can make it available for anyone to read upon request. The agreement, in short, says Abahlali will encourage its members to vote for the DA provided that they [the DA] will prioritize shack settlements and the poor.

The central theme that binds this agreement is a simple principle: nothing for us without us. Above all, the agreement is a demand for respect and dignity.

I was speaking to a leader of the DA. He looked at our agreement and said, "This agreement is not only legally binding, but for us, the DA, this agreement is morally binding." That is the kind of acknowledgement that has been missing from our interactions with the ANC.

GU: *The DA's outlook on economic policy and the poor does not correlate with this agreement. Besides, the DA is not governing the eThekweni council of the KZN province for that matter. They're in no position to fulfill this agreement?*

SZ: The key to this endorsement is that the terms of the agreement are legally binding. The agreement was co-drafted by our attorney. Abahlali set the terms and the DA has accepted the terms.

Now, yes, the DA does not govern in Durban, but they're the official opposition party. That carries weight.

With our endorsement, the DA could increase their electoral share in KZN and in other places in the country. But more importantly, our endorsement means that we put the struggles of the shack dwellers and the poor on the DA's agenda.

GU: Many of these terms seem to be focused particularly on Abahlali in Durban. Wouldn't it have been more realistic to endorse the DA in the 2016 local government elections?

SZ: The 2014 general election is important. The contempt of the poor and violent state repression cannot carry on. This is why we did not wait for the 2016 local government elections to endorse the DA. Our struggle is a daily one; it is not tied to election cycles.

GU: Abahlali has been a strong partner of the Poor Peoples' Alliance since its formation in 2008. Does your endorsement of the DA diminish your standing in the alliance?

SZ: The Poor Peoples' Alliance has not realized its potential. It is weak. We haven't met for the past twelve months, so there has been a lack of coordination. Some alliance partners have also been unable to move swiftly. The Rural Network is on its knees and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign basically fell apart two years ago.

Nonetheless, I think the alliance partners will respect Abahlali's decision, even though they may disagree with us.

GU: What was the process of arriving at the decision to endorse the DA?

SZ: We invited political parties to outline their manifestos to us. We invited the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the Democratic Alliance (DA), the National Freedom Party (NFP) and the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP). The ANC was not invited deliberately; this was a conscious decision we took.

I must add that the decision to invite the DA was a contested one. Many of our members argued that the DA is just like the ANC and would be unable to take our plight seriously. We debated it at length and decided to invite them. Internal democracy is important for Abahlali, so this is a decision that has the support of the members.

17 JULY 2014

Speech · S'bu Zikode

The Politic of Freedom without Land

Tenth Biennial Consultation on Urban Ministry, 'Un-Shack-led: Faith and the City 20 Years Later', Pretoria, 15–17 July 2014

I am honoured and humbled to be invited to be here, and to speak at this church. On behalf of Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement SA, the movement that has entrusted me with this responsibility to participate in your meeting, I wish to express our gratitude for this invitation.

The churches have rallied to our struggle in difficult times – after shack fires, after arrests, after beatings, after evictions and after shootings. We know about the role that churches have played in Brazil and in Haiti. We believe that the churches can play the same role here in South Africa if they take a clear decision, as some church leaders bravely have already, to be with the people, to clearly take the side of the people, instead of being another stakeholder in another government or civil society meeting. Bishop Rubin Philip has stood strong in the politic of the poor.

I have been asked to speak on the question of freedom without land. It is often thought that the land question is a rural question and that the main question in the cities is the housing question. Of course housing is very important. The statistics tell us that there is a housing backlog of around 2.1 million in South Africa and that this backlog is getting worse and not better. Everyone deserves to live in decent accommodation. Children should not be forced to live with their parents when they become adults and begin their own families. Women should not be forced to live with men that abuse them because they have nowhere else to go. No one should have to live in a shack.

But land comes before housing because every house, or block of flats, must be on land. Land also comes before housing because the housing question is about the right to the city as well as the quality of buildings. Houses that are far outside the cities exclude people from opportunities for livelihoods, education and the other benefits of life in a city like health care, sports facilities, libraries,

entertainment for young people and cultural life. Also, when people have land they can build and improve their own houses over time.

For all these reasons our struggle is a land struggle before it is a housing struggle. Our belief is that land is a precious gift from God. So, land is to be shared equally amongst all creatures including human beings. Land should be used to produce food, we should live on it in peace and in harmony and we should be able to build houses. It is to be loved and taken care of. There should be no institution or individual that can claim super power over land. Land should not be bought and sold. The legal system that turned land into a commodity came with colonialism. We are twenty years after apartheid but this legal system remains. It continues to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. It continues to exclude the majority of the people from the cities. Only the people, organised from below and democratically, have the right to decide on the future of land use. Abahlali have always warned that the social value of land must come before its commercial value. We also have to add that the interests of the people must come before the interests of the politicians.

Clearly freedom without land is a fake freedom. We are often lectured about freedom and at some times bussed into stadiums to listen to a few politicians, business men and other rich people tell us that we are free. It has been difficult to think about the relationship between land and freedom and to talk about “no freedom without land” without building a powerful voice from below. It will continue to be a difficult subject for as long as we continue to pretend as if the question land is not a political issue. We know that this problem will not be solved by consultant’s reports, academic’s conferences or prayers without action. MEC meetings at the ICC or Sun Coast Hotel will not solve this problem. This problem can only be solved when the poor, who do not count in our society, organise ourselves to insist that we count the same as all other people. Those of us who have no land must occupy unused land. Those of us that have no homes must occupy unused flats and houses.

Twenty years of shack life has been uneasy and unfair for us. Twenty years after apartheid the cities are still unfair, unwelcoming and divided. Since 2005 we have made constant efforts to build a movement that is committed to fighting landlessness and homelessness. We have organised the shack dwellers and this has been criminalised. We have occupied unused land and got arrested, shot

at and even killed. This has been called invasion, while we call it the democratisation of urban planning. We have connected services that have been refused to us such as water and electricity and got arrested, beaten and even killed. This has been called 'izinyoka' and we have called this people's connection.

It is clear that the government is not on the side of the poor. We have no choice but to take action for ourselves and our families. To those who condemn us for occupying unused land, building houses, community halls and crèches for ourselves and connecting ourselves to water and electricity we ask what choice do we have when the commercial value of land comes before its social value? What choice do we have when the personal interests of politicians and their friends and families come before the people? What choice do we have while the government demolishes shacks and traditional houses leaving people homeless? What choice do we have when millions of us remain in shacks and transit camps? What choice do we have when millions of Rand set aside for housing are returned to the National Treasury unspent? What choice do we have when we are murdered with impunity by the izinkabi and the police when we stand up for ourselves? What choice do we have when local councillors are leaders during the day and become hit men at night? What choice do we have when the municipalities ignore the law? What choice do we have when the eThekweni Municipality tears down our homes in breach of court orders?

Those who say that land occupations and self-organised connections to water and electricity are against the law ignore the fact that the law excludes us from land and that everywhere in South Africa the municipalities treat the poor as if we are beneath the law. Illegal evictions are the order of the day everywhere. In Durban even court orders against evictions are ignored.

We take our place in our cities with great humbleness because we know that we do not have all the answers. We know that no one has all the answers. Our politic is about carefully working things out together, moving forward together. We do not allow the state to keep us quite in the name of a revolution that does not come. We do not allow the NGOs to keep us quite in the name of future socialism that they have no power to build. Sometimes we take our place in streets with tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets. Sometimes we take that places in the courts and win victories that are ignored. Sometimes we take that place in the media, in church meetings like this one, or in universities. Sometimes we take it by occupying a piece of land and rebuilding our shacks

again and again after every eviction, every beating, every arrest, every shooting and every murder. Taking our place in the cities, and in the debates, has come with a heavy price for some of us. Some of us have been tortured, some of us have had our homes burnt down and some of us have been murdered. There is also character assassination, defamation and slander. But despite all of this we continue to organise and we continue to occupy land. It requires a principled and brave movement to build justice from below in a country that is so unjust. We all know that more of us will be killed. We all know that while lawyers can do very important work for our struggle, and that while tactical voting might be a useful way to limit repression, that neither the law nor voting will bring justice. It is the courage and persistence of the oppressed, our inkani, that will take us forward.

Today we invite the church to walk this journey with us. We invite your presence when we face the Red Ants and the Blue Ants tearing our homes without court orders. We invite your presence when we are in the holding cells. We invite your presence when local party structures try to prevent us from holding meetings and organising. We invite your presence when we must bury those who have been murdered. We invite your presence when we occupy land. We invite your presence when lies beat down on us because we have stood up for ourselves instead of allowing the politicians and civil society to represent us. We invite your presence when we discuss the real meaning of freedom.

21 OCTOBER 2014

Presentation · S'bu Zikode

Twenty Years of Hell in Shacks

DDP conference on 'Twenty Years of Local Democracy in South Africa', Durban, 20–21 October 2014

Twenty years of local democracy in South Africa has been very cruel for Abahlali baseMjondolo and for millions of other poor people. It has been twenty years of hell in shacks. It has been twenty years of living like pigs in the mud. It has been twenty years of living with rats, floods, fire and rotting rubbish. It has also been twenty years of evictions and forced removals to transit camps and other human dumping grounds. For those of us who have stood up for our humanity our reward has been lies, assault, torture, wrongful arrest, the destruction of our homes and even assassination.

Democracy is described in various positive ways by experts and politicians in South Africa. But to millions of shack dwellers, the homeless and the landless, those who were made poor by colonialism and apartheid and remain poor today, democracy is just another form of oppressing people. Democracy has come to mean twenty years of shack life. It has come to mean that the poor must be loyal to poverty and obey the rules of individual councillors and their political parties. Democracy has meant that we should not question the authority of the councillors and their political parties. It has meant that we should not organise outside of state control. Democracy has come to mean that even if councillors are elected councillors and not imposed on people they must be accountable to powerful individuals in the party and not to the people who have elected them. Oh yes, democracy has come to mean we could be easily evicted anytime and anywhere without any court order. It means that we can just be beaten, arrested, tortured, even in police custody, and that we can be murdered in cold blood by the police, party thugs or izinkabi without anyone being brought to book. Democracy has meant that councillors in places like in KwaNdengezi and Cato Crest in Durban are free to act like gangsters with guns and intimidation rather than the servants of the people who voted for them.

Democracy has been reduced into what Dr Firoze Manji, who has just visited, Abahlali calls “ballot box democracy”. Dr Manji continued to remind us that in fact we are not the poor but we are people who have been impoverished. So we have been made poor by the very same system that pretends to want to improve our lives while in reality it makes our lives worse so that the rich and the politicians can live far better at our expense. Our voice has always been shut despite our insistence that shack dwellers can think the same way as other ordinary human beings and that therefore we have the right to determine our own future. For the past twenty years we have been treated with disrespect and as the people who do not count. We have been treated as the people who are beneath the law. The eThekweni municipality has excelled in reducing our humanity into objects. It has excelled at spitting on the Constitution of the Republic. Most NGOs have acted in the same way as the state by treating us like children. They enjoy talking so much about the poor without really wanting to speak directly with poor people in a way that respects us. They have concluded that it is their job to think for us, represent us and take decisions on our behalf, and lately to eat for us and on our behalf.

We should be grateful to all these protests that have emerged into powerful struggles giving a platform to the voice of the marginalized. Without these protests South Africans will have nowhere to find answers to our failing local democracy. But we must not forget that many people have paid a high price for their participation in these protests. Many have been arrested, many have been beaten, and many have been killed. In Durban local democracy has been replaced by the politic of blood, fear and hit men. In fact it is clear that while the impoverished are expected to vote in Durban there is no democracy for the impoverished in Durban. The name for what we face, day after day and year after year, is oppression. Anyone who says that we live in a democracy is either ignorant of the realities of the lives of the impoverished or does not believe that impoverished people have the same rights as all other people.

We respect and acknowledge the gains brought about by those who came before us. We salute the sung and unsung heroes of this country who fought for equality and justice for all. We salute the sung and unsung heroes who fought colonialism and apartheid as well as those who fought the new forms of oppression that came after apartheid.

These unsung heroes include the late Andries Tatane of Ficksburg, the striking miners massacred at Marikana, Thembinkosi Qumbela, Nkululeko Gwala and Nqobile Nzuza of Cato Crest, Thuli Ndlovu of KwaNdengezi and many others. They include as a living testimony Nkosinathi Mngomezulu who was shot eight times with live ammunition by the eThekweni municipality's Land Invasion Unit just for defending his house from being illegally demolished without a court order. Instead of Mngomezulu's perpetrator being arrested Mngomezulu himself was arrested after spending months in the ICU. The ambulance that was supposed to rush him to the hospital was refused and a person who rushed him to the hospital in his own car was arrested for saving Mngomezulu's life.

The only democracy that we have experienced in the last twenty years is the democracy that we have built for ourselves in our own communities and in our own struggle. This democracy is under attack. Everywhere it is being repressed by the state and co-opted by the ruling party, the state and the NGOs. This democracy has been treated as criminal or as treason by the state. It has been treated as ignorance by most NGOs. Most NGOs only want to workshop us, they do not want to be in solidarity with us. They do not recognise us as people who can think just like all other people.

Democracy from below assists the whole society in acknowledging the thinking and practices that take place in our dark confined corners of our society. These corners are shack settlements, flats, hostels, rural communities and farm communities. Democracy from below builds the power of the oppressed. It gives us a platform to take our place in the debates and the strength to take our place in the cities.

The local democracy managed by the state can only work when the impoverished and all those who do not count in our society count the same as all other people. It can only work when informality as a nature of our society is supported and not policed, bulldozed or confiscated. It can only work when all of us are equal in the eyes of the law and when the state and their NGOs also respect the law. It can only work when the social value of land comes before its commercial value. It can only work when land and housing are not allocated to the members of the ruling party and the ruling elites at the expense of the impoverished. It can only work when citizens have power over the individuals that they vote into power. And yes, it can only work when external forces that set and impose their agenda over the majority are exposed and dealt with decisively. We

do not believe that there can be a capitalist democracy. But irrespective of the economic system if politicians become referees and the players at the same time, as it happens now, corruption will continue to be the order of the day.

If we are seriously wanting to address the challenges of the past we should start investing in communities where there is no water and sanitation, where there is no electricity, where there is no road access and refuse collection and where people do not have tenure to the land they have occupied. All of this should be done in a participatory way that respects communities. We should start investing in the parts of our cities where there are no schools or infrastructure, where there are no community halls. We should start asking questions as to why Councillor Ngcobo in KwaNdengezi locks the community hall for himself. We should ask why houses are sold in a broad daylight in Mayville and other places and no one gets arrested but instead whistle blowers are killed. We should ask why the top politicians in our province are evicting people and struggling to get onto tender awarding committees which give millions of Rands to the same faces all the time. We should stop pretending as if we do not know what to do because of fearing to speak the truth to our new oppressors. Frantz Fanon once warned how the oppressed could easily become new oppressors. This is what we see in the new South Africa. The task of our generation is to do to these new oppressors what our parents and grandparents did to the old oppressors.

Protests are not just as a result of service delivery failures. They are a response to the undermining of the very humanity that makes our society. Protests are as a result of disrespecting, lying, excluding communities and treating communities with indignity. For too long we have allowed a politic of lies to dominate our society which reduces our politic to nothing other than criminality. It is making us into a nation of dishonesty. The public should reject a politic of lies even if it campaigns for election in the name of the people and their struggles. Lies and dishonesty should be criminalized by law so that irresponsible politicians are held accountable. To make our local government work our experts and responsible politicians, officials, NGOs, churches and responsible businessmen and woman should be judged by how much time they spend thinking and working with communities in order to understand local dynamics rather than just assuming that they know what each community needs. This meaningful engagement will make them better experts and better politicians. But as long as we do not face the reality that some of the people that run our cities are warlords

and gangsters that are often even feared by their own comrades we will continue to pretend as if we do not know what went wrong with our local democracy and society as a whole.

We have to tell the truth. The truth is that in Durban some of our rulers are gangsters who say that they are politicians. John Mchunu was not the only one. The truth is that in Durban you can be freely beaten, tortured, arrested and murdered for standing up to these gangsters. The truth is that the state does not provide local democracy in Durban. The truth is that the only local democracy that exists in Durban is built from below.

I thus suggest that local government should also work with democratic community organisations. They must be held accountable from below and not above to individual bosses as it is the case now. Ward Committees need to be democratised and trained on community developments. Allocation of services such as housing should not be politicised or allocated by ward councillors and their party committees. It must be transparent and democratic. The Integrated Development Plan must be developed with community structures and organisations and not by ward councillors and consultants who often do cut and paste. The social value of land must come before its commercial value. The upgrading of informal settlements must be the priority and relocation must be the last resort. Transit camps must come to an end; they are a disgrace to our society. Interim services such as water and sanitation, electricity, road access and refuse collection must be provided while communities wait for permanent infrastructural development and housing. Local government must support and invest in public participation. Local economy and skills development must be supported. There must be a clear, transparent and inclusive provincial and city-wide housing list. There must be clear housing allocation policy and democratic housing allocation committees. But more than anything else the lying needs to stop.

3 OCTOBER 2015

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Keynote Address on the Tenth Anniversary of Abahlali baseMjondolo

Tenth anniversary, Curries Fountain, 3 October 2015

I want to start with people that matter the most: Respected members of Abahlali baseMjondolo. Leadership of Abahlali, supporters and friends of our movement. Comrades from the Congolese Solidarity Campaign, comrades from Rural Network, comrades from the United Residents' Front, comrades from the United Front, comrades from South Durban Community Alliance, Unemployed People's Movement, comrades from the R2K, comrades from Church Land Programme, comrades from the Norwegian People's Aid, comrades from the Socio-Economic Right Institute of South Africa, church leadership that has accompanied us and continues to journey with us. Comrade Richard Pithouse, comrade Marie Huchzermeyer and comrades who have travelled from other parts of South Africa to be with us today. There are comrades from Cape Town and Johannesburg who are amongst us here. There are comrades who have travelled from abroad that I want to acknowledge – comrade Nigel Gibson from Boston, USA.

Comrades we have the pleasure to welcome Abahlali baseMjondolo of the Western Cape in Sweet Home Farm, Comrades from QQ-Khayelitsha led by our Chairperson comrade Siyamboleka James. We have the pleasure to welcome comrades from Johannesburg in Germiston, Protea South, Orange Grove and comrades from Vosloorus lead by Aphiwe Miya. We have the pleasure to welcome comrades from Free State, the United Residents Front.

Today marks the Tenth Anniversary of our movement. For us it is a very important moment, it is a special day. Comrades it is a day to celebrate the victories won on the journey we have travelled together. It is also a day to mourn as it reminds us of pain as well as joy as we reflect backwards. This journey comrades has not been easy. But in the middle of many difficulties and suffering, we have managed to remain a people's movement, with strong commitments and ideas,

with much creativity. Comrades we have succeeded to win many allies to our side. Today comrades as we share this day with you, and with all the oppressed people of South Africa, and the world, we must find lessons and fasten our belts as we prepare for the next ten years ahead of us. We have made a promise to ourselves and made an oath to our God and to our country and our world. An oath that we will struggle for justice, equality and dignity for those of us who are oppressed and excluded, for those who do not count to this society and this world. A promise that we will struggle for the social value of land to come before its commercial value. A promise that all the land and all wealth of the country must be shared equally. A promise that we must all enjoy the same the right to the cities. A promise that the poor and oppressed must be treated with respect and dignity. A promise that we will be able to participate in all decision making relating to ourselves and our communities.

Comrades we would not have been successful in this journey on our own. Many comrades have stood firm in solidarity with us. In this world speaking and acting for the poor is a very good career move. Thinking, speaking and struggling with the poor is taken as a scandal by the regressive forces in the state, civil society and, yes, in the authoritarian and racist parts of the left. In standing firm in solidarity with us some comrades have lost their jobs. In standing with us some comrades have risked their academic credentials. Some families have been torn apart. Some comrades, including high ranking bishops, have risked their religious credentials for us.

Some comrades and their families have paid a heavy price for our struggle. We have been tortured, arrested, beaten and shot at. Some of us lost our homes. We have been violently and illegally evicted from our homes and even killed. Comrades in this journey I am reminded of the Kennedy Six and the trial of the Kennedy 12. In this difficult journey comrades I cannot forget how Nkululeko Gwala, Thembinkosi Qumbela and Nqobile Nzuza and, yes, Thulile Ndlovu, were assassinated. These four comrades were committed to justice and equality, to the struggle for land, for the right of the people to participate in all decisions about themselves and their communities. They risked their lives to oppose corruption. Comrades, today, even in this time of celebration, we remain in solidarity with miners who were slain in Marikana and their families. We remain in solidarity with all the activists who have been assassinated and all the activists who have been murdered by the police during protests.

Comrades, these are not only the comrades who passed on during the course of our journey. There are also some comrades with whom we founded this movement who have also passed on. Comrade baba Duma, mama Madida, mama Magagul, Sipho Gwala, Chazumuzi Ngcobo, Cosmos Nkwanyana, Mdududzi Ngqulunga, Fikile Nkosi, Bongo Dlamini, Sli Motha and others. These comrades made their contribution and sacrifice to our struggle for a better humanity, justice, equality and opposition to corruption.

Comrades we have achieved a lot in our journey for land, decent housing and dignity. When we began our movement there was a policy prohibiting the installation of electricity to all shack dwellers in Durban. Today there is an agreement that electricity should be provided and although it is slow the roll out has started. When we began our movement most settlements had no working toilets or showers, we used to use bushes to relieve ourselves. Today ablution blocks with showers are being rolled out. When we began our movement government, NGOs and academics would all talk for us. Today we are able to speak for ourselves. We have not just occupied land – we have occupied space in the media and in all kinds of political and other discussions. When we began our movement there was no independent political instrument for shack dwellers and other poor people. Today we have a powerful movement that can contest the state, the ruling party, private landowners and other forces in communities, in the streets, in the courts and in the media. Since the Slums Act was first passed in 2007 the state has continually been trying to roll back the limited gains won for people occupying land outside of the law in the new Constitution and the PIE Act. We have continually defeated these attempts. We have fought a long and hard struggle against transit camps. The Municipality called them ‘housing opportunities’. We called them ‘human dumping grounds’ designed to break our political autonomy and we hold on occupied land. As a result of committed resistance the Municipality has now promised to stop building these organised attacks on our dignity as humanity beings. However many of our members, and many others, remain in the transit camps.

Since 2008 we have consistently and seriously opposed xenophobia. There has never been any xenophobic attack in any area where we have a branch. We continue to work closely with migrant organisations integrating them into our activities. Our solidarity with the Congolese Solidarity Campaign is an example

of our strong commitment to Africa without political borders imposed on human life. After ten years we remain committed to the principle that there should be nothing for us, without us. We do not want people to define us, talk for us, or to decide for us, in our absence. After ten years we remain committed to the politic that has dignity of the poor as its main objective. We are all human beings just before we are anything else. Oppression vandalizes our humanity. Resistance restores our humanity.

Comrades we must build from all our achievements and the spirit of resistance in order to make our way into the next ten year as we move forward. Comrades we will have to invest all our energy and resources that we have to build our families and our communities. Where we do not have land, let us occupy land. Where we have shacks and where we can afford it, even if bit by bit, let us build our own decent homes. Where we have no water and sanitation let us not waste time and connect ourselves to clean water and sanitation. Where we have no electricity, let us help Eskom and the state and connect our own homes to electricity to save our lives and the lives of our children. If the state still refuses to release serviced sites at least in order for us to build our houses then let us assist them. Comrades we must intensify our struggle for the establishment of a democratic and transparent housing list. Let us fight for the creation of housing allocation policy and creation of housing allocation committee that is democratic and made with democratic peoples' organisations and not only the ruling party. Let us insist on the collective and not the individual ownership of the land that we have won in struggle. Let us struggle to build decent homes and free ourselves from all kinds of oppressions in our families, neighbourhood and the state and its party. Let us stand strong in our opposition to xenophobia, which is aimed to divide the oppressed. Let us stand strong in our commitment to women's power in the struggle and in society.

Comrades we all know that KwaZulu-Natal is made to be a violent and blood province as many of its politicians rule with terror. They have created and sustained a politic of blood and fear. Let us rise as we have risen above this kind of politic and expose all perpetrators as we have done with Mzi, Nqola and Lutyeku. Comrades we can only achieve this when we work in the spirit of ubuhlali and our living politic.

Today, comrades let us take this opportunity to extend our warm gratitude to our solidarity partners who have carried us through thick and thin in this

difficult journey. The Church Land Programme, we would not have made it without your support. The Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa you have stood firm with us throughout the long journey through the courts. War on Want you have understood that poverty is political and pledged with us to fight global poverty and injustices. The South Africa Development Fund your support has been amazing. Amnesty International you have always been there to work with us to secure our safety when our lives are under threat. We thank you. Entraide & Fraternite you have walked the journey with us and reminded us that you will be with us in spirit and that “in the middle of many difficulties, pain and suffering you remained a peoples’ movement”. Misereor we appreciate the thought and care, and the deep understanding of people’s struggles in Latin America that you have brought to your support for us, especially in dark times. XminusY you have supported direct radical action and your solidarity has helped us to create the force and the power we are witnessing today. We cannot forget intellectual comrades that have walked side by side with us. Even when the journey has been very tough you remained principled. To all our friends and comrades abroad we cannot forget your support and solidarity. Your protests against repression have been vital in keeping the space open for us to organise and resist.

Today, on behalf of all Abahlali baseMjondolo, our friends, partners and comrades and in the interest of love for our country and our world I wish you all a Happy Tenth Year Birthday.

The struggles continues.

11 OCTOBER 2015

Lecture · S'bu Zikode

The First Annual Thuli Ndlovu Lecture

First Annual Thuli Ndlovu Lecture, 2015

Ndlovu family, mama ka Thuli, Thuli's daughters Slindile and Freedom, Comrades, friends and colleagues. Today we gather here not to mourn but to celebrate Thuli Ndlovu's life. Today we also gather here to remember and to celebrate the life of Nqobile Nzuza, the life of Nkululeko Gwala and the life of Thembinkosi Qumbela.

All four comrades were murdered in cold blood by senseless killers who have no heart for human life. Comrades both Thuli and Nqobile were murdered in the month of September. Thuli Ndlovu was murdered on the 29th of September 2014 and Nqobile was murdered on the 30th of September 2013. Comrades it was on the 26th and 27th of September 2009 that our movement and our leaders were attacked by ANC associated thugs after winning a case against the then Slums Act at the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg.

September is supposed to be Heritage Month but September is a dark month for our movement. It is the month in which we are forced to remember the repression that we have suffered. It is the month in which we remember all the comrades who have been killed, shot, beaten, tortured in police custody, driven from their homes, forced out of their jobs, harassed in various ways and slandered.

Today we are launching the annual Thuli Ndlovu Lecture as part of our commitment not only to remember but also to honour the high price that our heroes have paid for their commitment to ubuhlali. It is important that we reflect and learn from these courageous cadres of our movement.

We do not count to this society. We are not recognised as human beings. Our suffering does not count as human suffering. Our lives do not count as human lives. Of course we struggle for land and housing, for access to schools, water, sanitation and electricity. Of course we struggle against corruption. Of course we struggle for the right to participate in all decision making relating to

our lives and communities. But we also have to take the responsibility to dress ourselves in human clothes, to minister to our own suffering and to honour our own dead. Our struggle has to be our home as well as our weapon.

Over the last ten years many of the most powerful leaders in our movement have been women. Women have stood strong in the struggle. Today as we honour the strength and courage of Thuli we also honour the strength and courage of all the women who have stood strong in the struggle and who continue to stand strong in the struggle. The strength of our movement cannot be separated from the strength of the women in our movement. We are all well aware that when men are given the responsibility to lead they are mostly given that responsibility by women. Today we say to Zuma and Nxumalo Wathint 'Abafazi Wathint' Imbokodo!

Thuli was senior leader in our movement. She was a humble and a down to earth person but she took her work very firm. She represented Abahlali bakwaNdengezi with all her heart and energy. In meetings she would smile and make her point firmly. She was never charismatic when she articulated issues at Abahlali, but always humble and firm. The Goliath of our day thinks that it can take advantage of people that humble themselves. It sees humility as weakness. It could not be more wrong. The humility of our leaders is an important foundation for the strength of our movement and our struggle. The vanity of our oppressors is one of their main weaknesses. The role of the leader in our movement has never been to order and control. It has always been to create a space where people can reflect and act together in the strength that comes from togetherness. A good leader is one that works to empower the members and to create a home for them. For us the leader is the tool of the people. For our oppressors the people are the tools of the leaders.

Thuli's assassins could not believe that such a humble person could destroy their empire built out of our suffering and the dispossession of our right to land, to decision making and to life. Comrade Nkululeko's leadership also empowered the oppressed and was therefore intolerable for the top officials in the ANC and the Municipality whose wealth and power comes directly from our oppression.

Today we note with great anger that our lives count for nothing in this society and that the poor are treated as if we are beneath the law. Today thousands

of shack dwellers and other poor people are without land. We are without decent homes. Our children struggle to access decent schools. We are denied water, electricity and sanitation. We must face constant fires. In some settlements there are also floods. Instead of assisting us the state sends out the police, the private security guards and the land invasion units to disposes us from the land that we have occupied, the services that we have appropriated and the homes that we have built for ourselves. Democracy has not meant the rule of the poor and it has not meant rule for the poor.

We are working to build the power of the poor outside of the state. Our movement believes that land, cities, wealth and power must be shared. We want to turn the state into a tool of the people as a whole by building the power of the people outside of the state.

Comrades we can safely say that the late comrades have left Abahlali a better movement than they have found it. Today we have twenty seven branches in this province and many supporters outside of these branches. We are a movement of political consciousness. We continue to insist that our lives matter.

The ownership of land in KwaNdengezi has been clarified. The illegal and violent evictions by Nqola have been stopped. Nqola has been arrested and charged with murder. In Cato Crest the land occupation has been won by struggle in the community, in the streets and in court. Comrades live in peace as we speak. Their souls did not die in vain. Bahlali we can draw very important lessons from ubuhlali as lived by our late comrades. One lesson is that when we take our place in our society humbly but firmly we make real advances and win real victories. Another lesson is that an informed inkani breeds land for peace. Most important is that the real struggle for justice rejects the politic of fear and shall reign over the shadow of fear and death.

Today we celebrate that the warlord and gangster Nqola and his comrades are facing charges of murder and attempted murder. But in Cato Crest Mzi, Dlomo, Nxumalo and Mnganga got away with the murder of our comrades. It is a dangerous time that has turned leaders into dangerous monsters.

Comrades I want to end by insisting that if Durban and KwaZulu-Natal are to be a home for everyone, a caring and a welcoming province then our city authorities will have stop discrimination against the people born from other provinces and other countries. The City will have to do away with the politic of blood and fear. The City will have to learn to engage shack dwellers and other

poor as equals, as citizens, and to do away with violence acts. The City will have to replace governance by the police, private security guards and the land invasion units with peaceful and meaningful negotiations. The City will have to come up with a clear and clean housing allocation policy. The City will have to come up with a clear and democratic housing list. The City will have to come up with democratic housing allocation Committee. The City and the provincial government will have to release land first and allocate serviced sites to families before a house can be build.

The fight to put the social value of land before its commercial value continues. Every September we will honour Thuli Ndlovu, and all other comrades that have given their lives to the struggle, and suffered repression as a result of their commitment to the struggle.

12 JULY 2016

Paper · S'bu Zikode

The Political and Economic Challenges Facing the Provision of Municipal Infrastructure in Durban

Workshop on the politics of municipal infrastructure, DUT, 12 July 2016

I wish to take this opportunity to thank the organisers of this workshop for recognising the struggle of Abahlali baseMjondolo. Today I wish to extend my gratitude to Wits and to Michigan for inviting me to share Abahlali's experience in our dignified struggle which includes struggle for land, housing, water, sewerage, electricity and transport.

But before I share our experience, may I take this opportunity to briefly introduce to you Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement SA. The movement was formed in the Kennedy Road shack settlement in Clare Estate here in Durban in 2005. It was formed to fight for, protect, promote and advance the interests and dignity of shack dwellers and other impoverished people in South Africa.

Kennedy Road settlement is one of many shack settlements in Durban that are established in a well located area. It is located in a middle class suburb with economic opportunities, good schools and other infrastructures at its disposal. One of these infrastructures is that it is close to the city's biggest dump run by Durban Solid Waste. Some people sourced building materials from the dump and some made their livelihood here. But many others worked as domestic workers, security guards, construction workers, informal traders and so on.

At the time of the movement's formation Kennedy Road was facing eviction. We were told that the dump itself was very health hazardous for residents within the shack settlement. We were told that there was a migrating methane gas underneath the soil to the settlement which was even more dangerous for residents. Other settlements in the middle class suburbs were also facing eviction. Always people would be told that the eviction was needed as a result of unsafe conditions. People might be told that the land was too steep or unstable to build housing for impoverished people although middle class people were

living well on the same land. In Kennedy Road the middle class residents just across the road were told that there was no risk to them from the dump.

The conditions were very bad in the settlement due to the lack of infrastructure. There was no refuse collection and so rubbish quickly accumulated. We were threatened with big rats that from time to time were seen running across settlement. A year later a six month baby was killed by a rat while sleeping with her mom. We were also told that the land was too steep and unstable for housing development.

Because there was no electricity and very few taps fires were a constant risk. There were only five water stand pipes that served around 6 000 people. This meant that it was very difficult to fight fires. In 2006 a one year old child, Mhlengi Khumalo, was killed in a shack fire and as time passed several more people were burnt to death. In most cases the fire department would take up to 30 minutes to arrive in the settlement and sometimes they did not have sufficient water. If they did have sufficient water they often could not reach burning shacks because there were no access roads. Abahlali discovered that eThekweni municipality had a policy not to electrify shack settlements. So, we had a situation where there was not enough water stand pipes, inadequate access roads, no fire break and electricity provision was prohibited

The shortage of taps also meant that people spent a lot of time queuing to fetch water. Carrying water down steep hills was dangerous when it rained and the paths were muddy. This made everyday life very difficult. In some families women carried most of this burden. The shortage of water was very difficult for people who were sick, especially when they had diarrhoea.

The lack of electricity also meant that people had to use candles for light, gas stoves to cook and fire to keep warm all of which raise the risk of fire. Learners and students had to study in candle light.

There were 43 ventilated pit latrines that had been blocked for years. People were deeply shocked when children were found eating the worms that emanated from these toilets thinking that they were rice. There were 6 portable toilets. With more than a thousand people for each of these portable toilets they were in a terrible condition and always blocked. Women were at particular risk of assault, robbery and rape when looking for a private place to go the toilet.

People felt that they were being treated as if they were not human. They felt that the conditions were deliberately being made so difficult, even life threatening, to force them to accept forced removal out of the city to what people called the 'human dumping grounds'. They felt that the government was saying that if we wanted a formal house and water, sanitation and electricity we must accept exclusion from the city. But people were not willing to accept forced removal to places 30 or 40 kilometres outside of the city because there were no opportunities for livelihoods there, no good schools and when there was transport it was very expensive. We saw the forced removals as a new kind of segregation, this time taking impoverished people out of the cities.

At the time the government had a policy of 'eradicating slums'. They promised that there would be no more 'slums' by 2014. When they 'eradicated a slum' they came with guns. They came like they were coming for a war. Some people would be left homeless and others would be taken to tiny and badly made 'houses' far outside of the cities, in the 'human dumping grounds'. People called these houses 'dog kennels'.

We organised to stop the evictions. We were successful in this. We also organised to stop the 'slum eradication' program. We were also successful in this. We organised ourselves to arrange clean ups and we brought 'Operation Khanyisa" (self-connection to electricity) which started in Soweto to Durban. A few people were already connecting themselves but in a disorganised and sometimes dangerous way. We organised self-connections across whole settlements in a safe and well organised with properly insulated and buried cables. We were also able to organise more taps and even some toilets by connecting ourselves to the plumbing infrastructure. At the same time we struggled for the state to provide electricity, more taps, toilets and paths. We eventually succeeded in overturning the ban on the provision of electricity to shack settlements and the Municipality agreed to begin providing ablution blocks to settlements (they also drained the pit latrines in Kennedy Road). However provision has been too slow. We also won an agreement that settlements in well located areas, like Kennedy Road, would be upgraded in a participatory way rather than destroyed and people either left homeless or forcibly removed to the human dumping grounds.

However this agreement was not implemented. The ANC cannot accept that housing can be provided outside of its control. The tenders, the jobs and the allocation of the houses all go through party structures to sustain the power of

the party over the people. This is one of the reasons why we were attacked and driven out of the Kennedy Road settlement by the ANC, acting with the support of the police, in 2009.

We continue to occupy new lands, to provide our own infrastructure where possible, to struggle for settlements to receive services from the municipality and for participatory upgrades.

We have faced serious repression in our struggle including assault, slander, arrest, torture, imprisonment and murder. Basic rights, like the right to protest, have been denied to us. It is not just the state that wants impoverished people to remain in our dark corners while others speak for us and decide for us. Some NGOs and academics have also thought that they have a right to speak for us and to decide for us. They have also behaved in a repressive way.

Just a week ago an eThekweni Parks and Cemeteries official visited one of our settlements called George Hill in Sydenham. George Hill is well located on privately owned land less than 10 km from the Durban CBD. They have no toilets and no water stand pipe. Just below the settlement there is a small public park and a little pool with fish inside. The official was very angry blaming residents for urinating and toileting under the trees there. She claimed that all this dirt flows to the pool to kill the fish. She made several calls from the police to the councillors' office and to Abahlali. When I had a telephonic conversation with her she made it clear that she did not care about the fact that residents do not have toilets but she was more worried about the fish and the 'public park' that is being messed up. Again I was quickly reminded that the impoverished do not count in our city, as she saw no problem with blaming people without sanitation for the situation rather than blaming the fact that some residents of the city still do not have sanitation. It did not bother the official that residents were refused water and sanitation. She did not care if they have to grow their children in this environment. Instead she threatened to have them evicted through the private landlord who also said he does not want those residents on his property. For this official an eviction, an armed eviction, was a good solution. She wanted to remove impoverished people from their place in the city instead of making sure that they had a dignified and safe place in the city.

We have noticed that many university intellectuals talk about the land struggles as if they are only rural struggles. But the urban land struggle is an important

part of the land struggle. Land and housing are one of the major challenges facing our growing cities. Our cities continue to be highly contested as the cities fail to absorb and accommodate many of their habitants. Impoverished people continue to be governed with violence, nepotism and corruption. While we are told a lot about the shortage of land in urban centres we continue to successfully identify and occupy those unused vacant lands to give some space in the city for the oppressed. Our movement has always called for the social value of land to come before its commercial value. We have successfully stopped many evictions in this city through resistance in the courts, in communities and on the streets. We have also participated into people's urban planning and people's governance. We have identified and challenged problems with policy. We have exposed corrupt and vicious councillors including the two who are today serving life sentence in Westville prison for killing an Abahlali activist in the KwaNdengezi area.

The impoverished continued to be impoverished and excluded from nation building in post-apartheid South Africa. It has become clear that we do not count in our society. Our role is just to vote for our poverty and to obey politicians and some NGOs. It is taken as a crime for us to organise ourselves, to think for ourselves and to speak for ourselves. We do not have these entirely basic infrastructures simply because we are not recognised as human beings. There is no other reason. We all saw how quickly the stadiums were built in 2010. If our lives were taken seriously we would not be forced to continue living as we do.

State democracy does not work for us. It is for these reasons that we have started organising outside the state and its ruling party. We organise autonomously from all political parties and NGOs.

We acknowledge the fact that there is now rolling out of containers containing water and sanitation and showers (ablution blocks) in our shack settlements. We also see electricity being rolled out in some of the selected settlements. We acknowledge that some settlements will now be upgraded rather than destroyed. We welcome this progress. But we remind everyone that this progress comes from the struggles waged and won by the shack dwellers and other impoverished people. We remind everyone of the cost of these struggles – including murder.

Abahlali aims to build the power of the impoverished from below. We know our exclusion and oppression is not a question of budget constraints and priorities. It is a question of justice. Our organising calls for inclusive cities, for cities for all, irrespective one's socio-economic situation. We are well aware that it was the struggles of the people of this country that allowed the ANC to return from prison, exile and the underground. We are very confident in the political capacities of oppressed people. The only democracy we enjoy today is the democracy we have built for ourselves. The water and connections to electricity that we enjoy today are services we have provided for ourselves. And yes, the lands that we have successfully occupied and where we have built our lives are ours as a result of our struggle and resistance and we pride ourselves to it.

The eThekweni municipality has a budget of over 46 billion. It cannot justify its failure to provide electricity, water and sanitation in all the shack settlements in our city and to being working with people in shack settlements to plan participatory upgrades so that the impoverished can live a dignified life. We live as we do not because there is a shortage of land or money. We live as we do because we are not counted as human. Therefore at the heart of our struggle there is a duty to defend our humanity.

23 NOVEMBER 2016

Talk · Thapelo Mohapi

Popular Democratic Power is the Way to Challenge Inequality

Fighting Inequality – Talks on How to Change the World', Oslo, 23 November 2016

Greeting to all. I am Thapelo Mohapi the current elected General Secretary of the movement Abahlali baseMjondolo. I would like to begin by thanking our friends at Norwegian People's Aid for the invitation to participate in this discussion.

Abahlali baseMjondolo is a democratic movement of shack dwellers and other impoverished and marginalized people in South Africa. Last year we celebrated our tenth anniversary. We are the biggest popular movement to have emerged in post-apartheid South Africa. Our movement was formed in Durban 2005 to fight for, promote and advance the interests and dignity of shack dwellers and other impoverished people. Although we do have branches in other cities, and are expanding into other provinces, our movement is concentrated in the city of the Durban and the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Our movement is best known for our struggle for land and housing in our cities. But we also take up all kinds of other issues such as equal access to schools, opposition to corruption and opposition to forms of development that, like mining, will displace people from their land. We take a strong stand in support of the full equality of women. We work in solidarity with migrant organisations to oppose xenophobia. But most importantly Abahlali (as our movement is popularly known) struggles for the human dignity of shack dwellers and other impoverished people. We place the question of human dignity at the centre of our politics. The movement is a space where the dignity of impoverished people is recognised. It is also a space where we come together to build our power and to use that power to struggle for a world where our dignity is recognised.

Land is fundamental to our struggle. We have occupied and held land in many new land occupations. We have also successfully resisted many evictions from old land occupations through popular protest and by using the courts. We

have kept thousands of families on their land and in their homes. But, most importantly, we have built a politically conscious movement where we can, thinking together, develop a better understanding of poverty and what keeps us in poverty. Through the movement we can build our power together and organise and struggle for justice together. We are committed to a society and a world in which land, wealth and power are shared on an equal basis. We take the question of power very seriously and are committed to building the power of the oppressed. In our view a radical politics must start where the people are. It must be directed from below. We call this a living politics. Our movement and our struggle are organised around the values of ubuhhlalism.

Our movement is very pleased to be able to send a delegate to this meeting. The Norwegian people played a very important role in supporting the struggle against apartheid. We remember and acknowledge that role. But there is another reason why we are very happy to be able to send a delegate to this meeting. For many years the international solidarity networks that want to support struggles for social justice in South Africa have mostly chosen to support NGOs rather than popular struggles and movements. Norwegian People's Aid recognises that there is an important difference between NGOs and popular organisations. Your organisation also understands that as oppressed people we must organise and liberate ourselves and that we are already organising and struggling everyday. For this reason we respect your organisation and see a way to building relationships based on solidarity, respect and equality.

In 1994 our parents stood in those long queues to cast their first vote in what was to become a "New South Africa". We all thought that things will be better. Our parents had fought a good fight against the apartheid regime so that we could live a better life. But that better life did not come to the majority of the people. Millions are still living in abject poverty. Our lives count for nothing to the South African government. We are left to rot and to die in shacks. We are still living in the mud like pigs. We are still subjected to fire and floods. Every year lives are lost in these fires and floods.

When the new democracy came we found that our voices did not count to the government. When we raised our issues with the state we faced arrests, assault, death threats, slander and even murder. In KwaZulu-Natal, where I come from, there is what we call a politics of blood. In the year 2014 our comrades who were uncovering the corruption that was taking place in their areas had to pay

a heavy price for this cause. They lost their lives in the struggle. Assassination has become a common feature of politics in KwaZulu-Natal. Today we have orphans, widows and widowers as a result of this.

Inequality is not just a matter of colonial and apartheid history. We continue to be actively oppressed today. Previous generations were made poor by colonialism and apartheid. We are kept poor by new forms of oppression. I would like to give three examples of this from three different branches of our movement.

In the Briardene community, where I come from, we were about to be evicted by a wealthy businessman who happens to be a provincial police officer. We are a community of 280 families. He would come to where we live, armed and with other police officers, and demolish our shacks. In 2012 he burnt our shacks with petrol. We lost everything. We then decided that we should go to the street and protest outside his house against this injustice. We were sick and tired of this abuse by this particular person. He came to us and pulled out his firearm and opened fire to the crowd. One of the community members was shot at and injured in the process. Fortunately he was not killed. The bullet hit him in the thigh and broke his bone. That was the start of the struggle. We were alone in this. We tried to speak to the government officials to assist, but they could not assist us. The local councillor was in favour of us being removed from this land. We have been living in this community for more than 20 years. I grew up in this area. Both my parents passed on in this community. This businessman then approached the High Court in Durban to get a court order to evict us. We were about to be evicted in a place where we have lived for more than 20 years. We did not have a legal representative to prevent the eviction from taking place. We then approached Abahlali baseMjondolo for assistance. We learnt to organise and build our power from below. At first we had to represent ourselves as the community at the High Court. But later Abahlali assisted us with a very good legal team. We managed to successfully fight against this eviction with the help of Abahlali. Through organisation and struggle we as the community have managed to achieve a lot. Today we are still on the land. We also have sanitation in the form of toilets and water. We are also united, democratically organised and working with comrades across the city, the country and the world for a just social order.

In Cato Crest Abahlali has a powerful branch on the Marikana Land Occupation. The people decided to build on this land after they were left out in a government housing project because they were not members of the ruling party. Here our members were evicted more than 24 times. The municipality disobeyed a court order which prevented them from demolishing people's homes. Because the politicians and government officials regard themselves as bigger than the law they continued to demolish people's houses. In a protest march which took place in September 2014 in the main road in Cato Crest a 17 year old girl was brutally murdered by the police. Also in the same year Nkululeko Gwala, who was the chairperson of Abahlali in the branch of Cato Crest, was murdered by unknown hit men. The people who murdered him have not been apprehended till today. Gwala was publicly threatened by the chairperson of the ANC in Durban just before his assassination and we believe that the politicians were behind his murder. This was a very difficult time in our movement. Some of our leaders had to go underground. This was not the first time. Some of our leaders and members also had to go underground in 2009. We had to hide from those who wanted to kill us.

We have been killed and tortured by the very people whom we entrusted with our votes. Our crime is that we are standing up for our dignity. When we struggle for houses we are struggling for something that is in the Freedom Charter and that is also a right that is enshrined in the Constitution: the right to housing.

Today the people of Cato Crest are still holding the land and are living peacefully. This is through the struggles that the people went through. It is through struggle that we managed to win the right to land. That struggle included road blockades, rebuilding after each eviction, court action, solidarity with comrades across the city and international solidarity. It is struggle that builds collective power from below and opens the road to freedom and justice.

In KwaNdengezi the ward councillor was involved in the selling of government houses in daylight. Our chairperson in this branch, Ms Thuli Ndlovu, was assassinated for uncovering this corruption. On the eve of her death two councillors threatened her over the phone. Fortunately in her case the two ward councillors were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment together with the hit man that they hired to carry their dirty work.

Through these hardships the movement has grown immensely. We have about 35 500 members in good standing in the Kwazulu-Natal province. We have managed to create a home for thousands of people in our movement.

In the past people who are living in shacks were undermined. They were taken as people who can't think. Government, many NGOs and some academics all treated us as people who couldn't think. But through our struggle we have built our power together and we are now able to participate in many of the discussions that effect our lives. The government today recognises us as a movement. They have started to recognise us as a movement because our struggle, over ten years, has forced them to recognise us.

However we have a long way to go before we can build a more equal society. For us the most important task in the struggle to build a more equal society is to build the power of impoverished people through building democratic popular organisations. It is through these kinds of organisations that we can challenge the state and capital. We are always keen to make alliances, based on equality and mutual respect, with others, in South Africa and internationally, who share our commitment to democracy, dignity and justice.

10 JUNE 2017

Speech · S'bu Zikode

The Restoration of our Human Dignity is not Negotiable

Mzala Nxumalo Centre conference, 10 June 2017

I would like to thank the Mzala Nxumalo Centre for inviting us to speak at this conference. I only received this invitation because of the movement that I am part of so I would also like to thank Abahlali baseMjondolo for entrusting me with this responsibility to represent our views.

Abahlali baseMjondolo has about thirty five thousands members in 38 branches in KZN, Eastern Cape, Western Cape and Gauteng. In July this year we will be launching our first branch in Mpumalanga province, in Vukuzakhe Township. Our members are fundamentally committed to the struggle for land, housing and dignity. We have occupied and held land across this city. Some of our members have been arrested, assaulted, slandered, tortured and murdered in the this struggle.

The struggle for land is a struggle to put the social value of land before its commercial value. For this reason our struggle is clearly an anti-capitalist struggle. And when we take dignity seriously it quickly becomes clear that building a society in keeping with human dignity requires that wealth and land must be shared fairly and equally, and managed democratically.

For this reason we have always been clear that our struggle is a struggle from the left. This is clearly explained to new members. We have valuable relationships with radical comrades around the world, and movements like MST in Brazil. We are interested in building a living communism, a communism that emerges from the lives and struggles of the oppressed, and that can be used to build the power of the oppressed. Where ever possible we are committed to building alliances, based on autonomy and mutual respect, with other organisations struggling to build a more just world. Our members are already working with different organisation on common programmes. For instance in KwaNdengezi our members worked closely with members of the SACP to ensure that

two criminal councillors, responsible for assassinations, were arrested, charged, prosecuted and jailed.

Where ever different radical organisations have common objectives we must find ways to work together. Impoverishment is killing our people. The councillors are killing our people. It is vital that we work together and build effective alliances for change. For this reason we welcome the initiative of this conference.

Building a society where there are an equal opportunities, and a fair distribution of land, wealth and gains for everyone is never an easy task. We are confronted with a very tough task of struggling to achieve a society of Ubuntu when Ubuntu is not done to ask. We are confronted with a very tough task of having to redirect anger to where it should best serve the interests of the impoverished and the working class. In this dilemma sometimes we have to question our own strategies and tactics employed to deal with the evils of inequality and injustices. As we reflect on how we can achieve this goal the forces that are meant to keep the status quo will try to keep us apart and to divide us. It is not just the politicians that try to divide us. Some NGOs and academics perform the same role.

We have faced serious repression since our movement was founded in 2005. That repression has come from the ruling party, from the police and from local gangsters. It has often hidden itself behind the prejudices that exist in this society against people who are black and impoverished. No leftist will be surprised by any of this. However we have also faced serious attacks from people in universities and NGOs who find their power to be threatened by the self organisation of impoverished people. Sometimes these attacks have aligned themselves very closely to state repression. They have always been racist and dishonest. There is a serious problem of racism, corruption, authoritarianism and power hunger among some of the leftists in universities and NGOs.

We are also confronted by regressive forces who are blinded by the love of black capital. It is fundamentally wrong to think that black oppression is normal and therefore should be welcomed. Oppression remains oppression irrespective of who oppress us. Landlessness, evictions and assassinations remain evil even if they are perpetuated by black leaders. We are not struggling to ensure that our oppressors are changed from white people to black people. We are struggling to end our oppression.

If the left cannot heal itself, if it cannot be honest, and if it cannot learn to understand that oppressed people have a right to organise themselves, think for themselves and take their own decisions, then defeat, and the continued devastation of our people, are inevitable.

Another tough task is to help some politicians to remember that lies cannot be accepted in our society. Last week I attended the Provincial Summit on Social Cohesion and moral regeneration organised by the KwaZulu-Natal Premier's office and Provincial government. The summit was attended by high profile government officials, cabinet ministers, civil society and other groups and individuals. In the summit almost everyone who spoke referred to and based their presentation to people 'on the ground', rural communities and people in the townships and shack settlements. We are made to believe that the so called 'smart people' (rich people), people who dress in suits and ties, can be exempted from the moral regeneration project, suggesting that just because they have money and dress smart they are holy. Our humanity seems to be judged by class and socio economic status. So, our task has been to go out and help 'those people' and the nation in building a better society. Nobody says we must begin with councillors, mayors, and politicians in general, who continue to lie and ignore the plight of the oppressed. These people promote lies and when you ask them to account then they tell you "intombi ishelwa ngamanga" (honesty is not a best policy when proposing a girl). How can the people who violently evict impoverished people, including children, and leave them homeless be trusted with anything? How did we even begin this conversation without addressing socio-economic inequalities and the organised disrespect for the impoverished?

Abahlali have refused to accept oppression in the name of new democratic society. We have refused oppression in the name of a better life for all. We have refused oppression even when we have had our homes destroyed in the name of law and order. We have refused oppression even in the name of a new so called 'caring mayor'. And yes, we have refused oppression even in the face of death. We have lost comrades in our struggle. Recently we have lost baby Jayden Khoza at the hands of the police. The harmless and the innocents have suffered injustice and paid the ultimate price for being impoverished. How can we trust people who kill us?

We continue to build the power of the impoverished from below. We continue to educate ourselves on how we can achieve the kind of society we envision. We also continue to educate the state, policy makers, NGOs and the society at large on ubuhlali. We continue to educate all the experts that the struggle we are engaged in is not just about the so called 'service delivery' but the full restoration of our human dignity. It is about reclaiming our well-being of Ubuntu. For the left of today the struggle should be built on the basis that defines our Ubuntu. The living politic becomes critical, it becomes the foundation of all politic hence we have to start from where we are, with what we have. In doing this we must be guided by strong principles and values of ubuhlali. In this we must acknowledge that freedom without land is meaningless, freedom without real democracy is fake.

24 SEPTEMBER 2017

Lecture · S'bu Zikode

Isifundo sokukhumbula uThuli Ndlovu

Thuli Ndlovu Lecture, 2017

Ngiyabonga mphathi wohlelo, bahlali baseMjondolo, nabo bonke ubuholi babahlali kwi Sifundazwe sakithi KwaZulu/Natal naKuzwe lonke. Izihambeli zethu. Ngokukhethekile ngibingelela umama ka Thuli Ndlovu nomama ka Samuel Hloele nawo wonke umndeni wakwa Ndlovu nowakwa Hloele nomphakathi wakwa Ndengezi nase Kukhanyeni.

Bahlali namuhla sigubha iminyaka emithathu kwadlula emhlabeni isishosho sethu nomholi wethu oweyelwa nenkohlakalo uThuli Ndlovu. Namhlanje sikhumbula bonke abaholi bethu abafana no Nkululeko Gwala oweyengusihlalo wethu eCator Crest naye owabulawela ukuvumbulula inkohlakalo yezindlu. Sikhumbula uNqobile Nzuza umfundi oweyeneminyaka eyi shumi nesikhombisa vo efunda eBonela High School. UNqobile naye wabulawa ngamaphoyisa ngokudutshulwa emashini yokuzwakalisa ukungeneliseki ngendlela okwakwabiwa ngayo izindlu nokudilizwa kwemijondolo yabahlali eCator Crest. Kulonyaka umasipala weTheku namaphoyisa basibulalele umntwana uJayden Khoza no Samuel Hloele. Bonke labahlali siyabakhumbula namhlanje, siyababonga ngokuzinikela kwabo baze banikele nangezimpilo zabo ukuze thina nabantwana bethu kanjalo nesizukulwane esizayo siphile kangcono. Namhlanje sigubha usuku lwamagugu ngokukhumbula bona nokubabaza iqhaza labo embuthweni wabahlali.

Bahlali ayikho enye indlela yokubakhumbula nokubabonga ngaphandle kwale sifundo saminyaka yonke sokubakhumbula. Namhlanje ngifisa sifunde ngokuzimisela nokuzinikela kwalamaqhawe ethu. uThuli ubengumuntu wesifazane osemncane obethanda Abahlali ewuthanda umphakathi wakhe. Ngalesikhathi ebulawa wayengu sihlalo waBahlali egatsheni lakhe kwa Ndengezi, aphinde abeyilunga lesigungu sikazwe lonke saBahlali (National Council). Singafunda isibindi ayenaso ukubhekana nenkohlakalo yokwebiwa komhlaba weSizwe saManganga nenkohlakalo yezindlu kwa Ndengezi njengo Nkululeko

Gwala. wabhekana nezigelekeze zamakhansela azabe zesatshwa wumphakathi wonke oNqola nolu Tsheku okumanje badonsa izigwebo sikadilika jele eKokstada Kanye no shaya sibhamu wabo iphara lakwa Ndlvu. Udutshulwa nje uThuli wayekade ebuya eKapa nethimba labaholi babahlali beyomela uMbutho wethu. Yini esingayifunda kulabaholi? Uthando lombutho nabantu, ukuzinikela, ukuzimisela nokuba qotho. Abazange badayise ngani Bahlali emakhanseleni nakoMasipala nasemaqenjini ezezipolitiki. Babeka umphakathi phambi kwezimfuno zabo. Yingakhokhe banikela ngezimpilo zabo ukuze siphile kangcono. Singabakhohlwa kanjani ke abantu abanjalo ekubeni beba yincosana?

Bangaki abazimisele ukuzabalazela iqiniso, ubulingiswe nokulingana? Bangaki abangancamela ukufela eqinisweni. Namhlanje ngifisa sikhumbule lamaqhawe ethu, sigcine umlando wabo njengombutho nanjengamalunga.

Bahlali uma ngempela sizimisele ukulwela umhlaba, izindlu nesithunzi kuzobaluleka sibe qotho, sizimisele. Uma sikhetha abaholi kuwo wonke amazing abahlali asikhethe abantu abanothando lwabantu nabano thando lokusebenzela abantu. Singakhethi abaholi abazazisa bona. Singakhethi abaholi abazicabangela bona nabafuna ukuzinithisa bona. Singakhethi abaholi abango somathuba. Singakhethi abaholi abango thathekile. Singakhethi abaholi abathengekayo. Singakhethi abaholi abakhetha amakhansela nongxiwankulu ngaphambi kwethu. Singakhethi abaholi abahluleka nawukubiza umhlangano womphakathi bacabange ukuthi yibona abanamandla negunya lokucabangela umphakathi. Singavumi ukuba naba holi abangenalusizo lalutho, abafika phambi kwenu uma kunemicimbi yaba hlali nibe ningakaze nibabone emiphakathini yenu. Bahlali kufanele nizibuze ukuthi yini lomholi ningamazi. Yini sigcina ukumbona uma kuhlotshiswe amatafula, kune General Assembly noma umcimbi. Yini simbone uma kuno hambo (I trip) kodwa uma kunezinkinga emphakathini asimboni noma sesilifonele ihhovisi. Asizibuze ukuthi yini babe baningi kangaka phambi kwethu kodwa uma sihlukunyezwa asibaboni kufukuza abaholi abambalwa. Asazi ngisho izinamba zabo ngoba vele abazimisele ukusisebenzela. UThuli no Gwala, uSamuel noNqobile, Kanye noQumbela babe ngawona amavaka, bengawona amavila, bengabona omva kwezinye.

Uma sizimisele ngobuhlali, sizimisele ngezwe lethu angeke saqhubeka nokuvotela izigebengu ezidla umcebo wesizwe zizinithise zona. Angeke saqhubeka nokuseka inhlangano evumela ukuqhwaga nokubhozonyelwa

kombuso. Angeke saqhubeka sithembe inhlangothi ethutha imali yezwe iyise emazweni angaphandle sibe sihlupheka. Angeke saphinde silutheke, sithandwe uma sekuvotwa kuthi uma sekudlulile sinyukwe. I Meyu yeTheku isifundise lukhulu ukuthi ungaphinde umthembe usopolitiki noma yimuphi noma inini.

Kusukela namhlalnje asizithembe thina ngawo onke amandla esinawo nethuba esinalo. Sibe munye. Asizifundise ngobuhlali, sizithuthukise ngama khono nolwazi, siqinise intando yeningi ngaphakathi eMbuthweni. Sikwazi ukuhlukanisa izezo nombuso wobu ngxiwankulu nezenzo zobuhlali phakathi kwethu naphakathi kwaba holi bethu. Asiqeqeshane, zivulane amehlo. Asilwisane nokubhozonyelwa kombuso nenkohlakalo, ngoba sihlupheka nje yiwona lamatemu amasha. Masingazibukeli phansi singabi naba hlonishwa ngezwe lethu nekusasa labantwana bethu. Sekucacile ukuthi uma singasukumi sibhukule siyobekwa icala njenga mavaka izizukulwane ezizayo, sezingalifici izwe zifika igobolondo. Ngakho ke asenzele abantwana bethu.

Amandla!!!

23 MARCH 2018

Speech · S'bu Zikode

The Politics of the 'Expropriation of Land without Compensation' in South Africa

Land occupation indaba organised by the KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Human Settlements and Public Works, 23 March 2018. Also published in the Daily Maverick.

I am honoured and humbled to be invited here at this land occupation Indaba. On behalf of Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement SA, the movement that has entrusted me with this responsibility today, we wish to express my gratitude to the MEC for the opportunity to be part of this event.

Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement S.A is a democratic movement of the impoverished and marginalised in South Africa. Abahlali was formed in 2005 to fight for, protect, promote and advance the interests and dignity of the shack dwellers, and other impoverished people in South Africa.

I have been asked to speak on the question of land, and specifically the new proposal to expropriate land without compensation. The starting point of this discussion must be that access to land has been denied to the majority of black people in South Africa. Discussing land without discussing justice will be unjust. To take justice seriously we must take seriously that women have the same right to land as men, and that impoverished people must not be marginalised in this process. Discussing land without discussing impoverishment will also be unjust. Land is a rural and an urban question. It is also a question of food sovereignty and housing. It is a question of dignity. It will, ultimately, become a question of democracy.

Expropriation without compensation is already happening. It is progressive when democratic popular organisations occupy unused land. It is regressive when Municipalities send out armed men, like the Anti-Land Invasion Unit in Durban, the Red Ants in Johannesburg and the Law Enforcement in Cape Town to destroy people's homes and possessions and drive them off the land that they have occupied. Any discussion of land in South Africa that does not take these

progressive and regressive forms of expropriation seriously is fundamentally a joke.

The statistics tell us that there is a housing backlog of 2.1 million in South Africa. The crisis in the cities is urgent. This crisis cannot be resolved without making well located land available for housing. Land reform cannot, therefore, only be understood as a question of land for farming.

Our belief is that land is a precious gift from God. So, land is to be shared equally amongst all creatures including human beings. Land should produce foods, we should live on it in peace and in harmony and we should build houses etc. It is to be loved and taken care off. There should be no institution or individual that can claim superpower over land. Not the Anti-Land Invasion Unit, not the Red Ants. Not capitalism or the ruling party. Only the people from below, democratically organised, have the right to decide on the future of land use and ownership. Abahlali have always warned that the social value of land must come before its commercial value and not vice versa. We have always warned that South Africa must belong to all who live in it and that politicians must not be allowed to divide people according to where they were born or which languages they speak.

The expropriation of land without compensation is the government's new agenda. It is important that we remember that the black majority government has been in power since 1994. In more than twenty years in power they have systemically failed to take land reform, in rural and urban areas, seriously. But impoverished people have been struggling for land for many years. The current government has consistently repressed popular struggles for land, even going so far as to torture, jail and murder people struggling for land. Many lives have been lost in this struggle. In Cape Town the DA have also repressed these struggles. People's humanity has been vandalized. But the politicians have now returned the question of land to the top of the public agenda.

The ANC's new talk about 'expropriation of land without compensation' is a new voting campaign for the ruling party that aims at attracting black majority voters. The ruling party has lost its credibility with millions of people. It is hoping that this campaign will restore its credibility. But when they talk of expropriation as taking land from white farmers we know that land will go to black elites. We know that at the same time impoverished black people

will be violently driven off urban land occupations in unlawful and brutal evictions. Democratically organised land occupations from below will continue to be criminalised.

Our movement was founded in 2005 and we raised the question of expropriation on our first legal march organised from the Kennedy Road settlement. Land that was promised to build RDP houses for the community was sold to a local business man. Money was put before people. Lies were put before the truth. The Kennedy Road settlement was supposed to be 'eliminated'. It is still there. It is still there because of a struggle organised and fought from below. Many new land occupations have been organised around the city. The struggle for land is long and hard. It requires real courage and determination. But people are succeeding to expropriate land from below.

We have listened very carefully when politicians and government speak about land. They only talk about farmland and agricultural lands. They talk about mining lands, lands for big development projects like industries etc. and, yes, land as a commodity. They talk about taking land from the white farmers and giving it to black elites. They do not talk about urban land. They do not talk about land for housing. They do not talk about land for women and for the empowerment of women. They do not talk about land for the impoverished.

Two days ago was Human Rights Day. Let me be clear. If you are impoverished and black in South Africa your human rights are taken as a joke. Freedom is fake. You can be slandered, beaten, tortured and killed with impunity. The same black led government that is talking about expropriating land without compensation has squeezed us into tiny plots of land. We are placed in tiny, broken houses far out of the cities. Some of us remain locked in transit camps as if we are not human beings. In shacks we must live with fire, mud and rats. We share one shack as big families. We sleep with our grown up kids without privacy. When we occupy land to build our own future and to help our government restore dignity to the dispossessed and marginalised, we face brutal evictions. What is so sad is that government has no clear plan for our housing challenges but they have a clear and detailed plan on how the Anti-Land Invasion Unit should destroy our only hopes of homes. They can easily destroy our homes but they cannot build us homes. In eThekweni we are serving life sentences in the shacks after a former senior official made it clear to us that as long as his party is in charge of government Abahlali will not benefit anything. He

accuses Abahlali of “*nisidlisa kabi*” because they go to government to eat for us and on our behalf.

We are still oppressed. We know that the government will continue to oppress us as they seek our votes by talking about land. We know that if there is land reform it will not be for us. There is no clear plan for impoverished people in rural areas or in cities. Our migration to cities in search of the better future promised by our constitutional democracy has been brutally criminalised.

This problem can only be solved when the poor, who do not count in our society, begin to count. We will only begin to count when we build our own democratic power from below. The government has no plan for us to access well located urban land. Therefore the landless have no choice but to continue to occupy unused land. This is how those who have vast amounts of land will learn to share with the landless.

Our choices are very limited when our effort of building the power of the impoverished is reduced to criminality. Our choice to prevent housing corruption is turned into assassination. When councillors are threatened by our art of organising they end up killing us. Our choice has been to organise ourselves and build the power of the impoverished from below. And, yes, our choice has been to occupy unused and vacant land. We have paid an ultimate price for that. But we are determined to rise above the politic of expropriation of land without compensation to benefit few black elites, while the black majority remain in deep poverty. The occupation of vacant and unused land has worked for us and will continue to work as long as the government has no proper planning for our rural communities and for us in poor urban settlements.

The expropriation of land from below will continue. And we will continue to resist attempts at expropriation from above.

22 APRIL 2018

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Asikakhululeki

UnFreedom Day rally, Springfield TVET College, Durban, April 2018

Mphathi wohlelo Cde Bonono, Bahlali baseMjondolo, yonke imiphakathi yabahlali ekhona phakathi kwethu, Bahlali baseGauteng, Bahlali baseMpumalanga, Bahlali base Eastern Cape, Bahlali baKwaZulu/ Natal. Mphathi wohlelo ngikubone kubalulekile ukwephula imigomo (breaking protocols) ngiqale ngokubingelela Abahlali uqobo ngigcine ngaba holi. Uthi Ubhishop Rubbin Phillip ngelinye ilanga “abokugcina bayoba ngabokuqala)” the last will be the first on the list”. Abaholi babahlali bukazwe lonke, Sekela Mongameli waBahlali cde Mdlalose, Shlalo kaZwe lonke mama wethu MaMkhize Nxumalo, Nobhala cde Mohapi, nabo bonke ubuholi. Ubuholi bezifundazwe bonke, ubuholi bama Branch Abahlali wonke. Ubuholi bezinhlaka za Bahlali zonke uPhiko lomama noPhiko lentsha yaBahlali. Amakhosi akhona phakathi kwethu nezi’ zinduna. Zonke izivakashi ezikhona nabangani bethu. Imibutho ekhona phakathi kwethu esuka eKapa, I Rural Network, Social Justice Coalition, Housing Assembly, MUC, I R2K, Ubunye Bama Hostela, Abadayisi basemgwaqeni, abasuka embonini yama Tekisi, u Streetnet. Abangani nama partners ethu: Church Land Program, Norwegian People’s Aid, Socio Economic Rights Institute of South Africa, AIDC. Cde Pithouse, Cde Desmond D’sa, cde Zackie, naMagoza amahle.

Namhlanje sigubha usuku lweminyaka engu 24 izwe lathola intando yeningi neNkululeko yezoMbusazwe.

Nakuba sikubonga futhi sikuhlonipha kakhulu ukuthi kwaba naba holi abaqotho abanikela ngezimpilo zabo ukuze thina nabantwana bethu sithole lenkululeko yezombusazwe. Kodwa ngabe asinaqiniso futhi ngabe neqiniso alikho kithi uma singathi sikhululekile uma kuse nje. Umhlaba wokhokho awukabuyi ezandleni zabantu abamnyama kuze kube manje. Asikwazi ukuthi sikhululekile uma Abahlali bebulawa uma besebenzisa umhlaba ongenamuntu.

Ngonyaka ophelile nje uwodwa bahlanu (5) Abahlali ababulawe la eThekwini bebulawela umhlaba wokuhlala nokuphila. Yiwona lomhlaba osekuthiwa awubuye ngaphandle kwesinxephezelo, kodwa thina singcwabile futhi sisabulawa nanamhlanje uma sakha emhlabeni ongenamuntu, akushiwo lutho ngemndeni eyabulawela abathandiweyo babo. Asikwazi ukuthi sikhululekile uma izindlu nenqalasizinda kanye nezinsiza singenazo siphila ehlazweni. Asikwazi ukuthi sikhululekile amathuba emisebenzi engekho nemfundo incikisela. Asikwazi ukuthi sikhululekile inhlupheko nokungalingani kwezomnotho kudlebeleka. Ngakho ke besingeke saphelazela izinsizwa ezimbalwa nezintombi ezimbalwa esezakhululeka njengo Ndunankulu ne khabinethi yakhe no somabizinisi abanothile. Ngakho ke akunasisekelo ukuyogcwalisa izinkundla zemidlalo sithi sikhululekile ngoba naku sinekezwe izikibha zama hhala nokudla kosuku olulodwa bese sithi sikhululekile.

Omasipala bethu bayaqhubeka nokudilizela imiphakathi yethu ngesikhulu isihluku lesi. Siyakuqaphela kakhulu okwenzeka eThembisa e Vusimuzi-Section lapho kuhlukunyezwa abahlali egameli lentuthuko reblocking efunzwa abantu ngenkani. Sekuphele izinyanga abahlali sebeshilo ukuthi abayifuni lentuthuko okungavunyelwananga ngayo i(re-blocking). Kowa ukhansela uSeloane uyaqhubeka uyifaka ngenkani. No Somlomo waseku Rhuleni umhlangano uwuhlehlise ngamabomu ngo mhlaka 2 Meyi. Siyibonile impi ka masipala wase Thekwini eNkanini, New City, eKukhanyeni nase Kuphumeleleni. Siyjabula ke ukuzwa inqubekela phambili eyenzekile eNkanini nokuthi isigobe uphondo kumasipala. Kodwa siyazi ukuthi kulinyazwe abahlali ngesikhulu isihluku ngaphambi kwale mpumelelo eyenzekile. Siyabonga isibindi bahlali nokuzimisela nokuzinikela okungaka kuningi esikufunde kinina njen-gokuthi umhlaba uyalwelwa futhi uyafelwa. Sikubonile ukuhlukunyezwa kwaba hlali eMampondweni. Umhlaba wakhona untshontshwa emini kwa bha uhulumeni ehlangene nongxiwankulu bakwamanye amazwe. Asikwazi ukuthi sikhululekile uma uceba kwaMzize esabisa Abahlal, esongela ngokufa nezinkokheli zethu.

Simbonile uhulumeni ephuca amakhosi ubukhosi namandla egcoba izigebengu ezidayisa umhlaba waMampondo, kuze kusweleke o Cde uBhazuka nabanye abasekubhagceni ngithetha nje. Thina sazi ukuthi nkosi iyazalwa ayikethwa ngu hulumeni. Futhi thina sazi ukuthi inkosi yinkosi ngesizwe.

Simbonile uMasipala I Prible ka Seme e Volkrust ehudula izinyawo uku-
lungiselela Abahlali abahlezi ezindlini zakwa Loliwe. Singathi sikhululeke kan-
jani uma umasipala engasivikeli koso politiki abafuna ukusiphuca lezindlu
ngoba bethi azisifanele thina. Esikhundleni salokho uye kanye ofuna ukuzidla
lezindlu ukuze thina nabantwana bethu sakhelwe amathini noma siye emijon-
dolo.

EWestern Cape uhulumeni wakhona umemezele ngokukhulu ukuziqgaja
lokhu ukuthi usedilizele abantu abanga phezu kuka 60 000 esikhathini nje esin-
gango nyaka. Okusho ukuthi bangaphezu kuka 60 000 abantu abashiywe deng-
wana nabangenazo izindawo zokuhlala eWestern Cape. Konke lokhu bakubiza
ngentuthuko.

Konke lokhu nokuningi engingakuvezanga kwenza ukuthi singabi nasizathu
sokugubha usuku lweNkululeko nezwe lonke ngokulawula kuka hulumeni.

Ukuze siqobe, siphume kulolusizi esibhekene nalo, siding ukusebenza
kanzima ukushintsha isimo sezombusazwe esilawulwa ngobungxiwankulu
sakhe umbuso wobu hlali, umbuso wobuntu, umbuso we socialism lapho
wonke umhlaba nomnotho wezwe uzolawulwa ngabahlali naba sebenzi, hhayi
uhulumeni ngoba akathembekile futhi muva nje sewu holwa nayizigebengu
uqobo ezingagcini nje ngokuntshonstha kodwa sezidayise nango mbuso uqobo
kubantu bangaphandle njengama Guptas.

Egameni laba hlali ngifisa ukuthatha lelithuba ngenze izimemezelo ezimbili
ezinqala. Esokuqala, sinentokozo ukubika nokwethula ubulungu baba hlali
baseMjondolo obu hloliwe (audited). Sebufinyelele emashumini amahlanu
(50 000). Yize kunama branch angabaliwe angaphezu kwe shumi. Sibonga
imbokodo ebeyingalali isenzela lomsebenzi umama u OJ Majola wase Ku-
phumeleleni. Esesibili isimemezelo sithinta udaba “lokubuyiswa komhlaba
ngaphandle kwesinxephezelo” (“expropriation of land without compensation”).
Thina bantu abampofu naba hlala emijondolo sizabalazela ubulungiswa, ukulin-
gana, inhlonipho nesithunzi sawo wonke umuntu. Ngakho ke sikholelwa eku
hlonipheni wonke umuntu njenge sidalwa sika Nkulunkulu, nathi sifanelwe
ukuphathwa ngenhlonipho nangaso lesi sithunzi. Isikhathi esiningi sizizwa
singafanelekile, singashaywa mkhuba emehlweni ombuso nesizwe sonkana.
Sidilizelwe ngesikhulu isihluku, saboshwa, sahlukunyezwa ngisho emajele
ngaphakathi, sacindezelwa sahlambalazwa siphinde sibulawe uma sikhuluma
ngokuthinta ikusasa lobuntu bethu nomhlaba wokwakha nokuphila. Ngakho

ke njengomgomo, umhlaba uyisipho sika Nkulunkulu uMnini waMandla Onke owasidala. Ngakho ke ukusetshenziswa komhlaba ukuze sakhe siphile makuze ngaphambi kokuthi umhlaba usesthenziselwe ukwenza inzuzo (“the social value of land must come before its commercial value”).

- – Abahlali bakholelwa ekutheni ukuze ukusetshenziswa komhlaba kube yimpumelelo, abantu mababe nobunini bomhlaba obubahlanganisile njengo mphakathi (communal titles). Uhulumei akathembekile namanye amakhosi awathembekanga ukuthi singavuma ube sezandleni zabo.
- – Wonke umuntu kufanele abe nelungelo lomhlaba
- – Umhlaba kufanele sihlale kuwo, sisebenze kuwo, siziphilise kuwo, umhlaba awudayisi.
- – Sikubonile nokucindezelwa kwabantu besifazane odabeni lomhlaba. Sikholelwa ukuthi abantu besifazane nabo banelungelo elifana nelabesilisa. Ngakho ke umhlaba mawusetshenziselwe ukuthuthukisa abesifazane.
- – Ubunini bomhlaba abungabi obomuntu ngayedwana noma umlungu noma omnyama.
- – Umhlaba akube owawo wonke umuntu.
- – Abahlali bayoqhubeka nokusebenzisa umhlaba uma nje uhulumeni nomasipala bengasiniki umhlaba wokwakha amakhaya anesithunzi.
- – Umhlaba yiwona owakha Ubunye, nokuthula nesithunzi kubantu abasemazingeni aphansi.

Ukuyaphambili asiqinise umzabalazo wethu, singavumi ukukhohliswa futhi singavumi ukuthengwa ngoso politiki abanamanga nenzondo. Singathengwa ngama phasela okudla. Uma sifuna ushintsho asihlukane nokuvotela izigebengu ezingena nembeza. Asikwazi ukuvotela abantu ababodwa njalo kodwa bese silindela ushintsho ezimpilweni zethu, asenqabe namandla ethu. Sekuneqembu esaziyo ukuthi elababulali, asisaphelele singabahlali kodwa futhi thina sivotela bona labo babulali. Singaphinde sethembe omunye umuntu masizithembe thina kuphela, thina sodwa nje

Amandla! Sifuna umhlaba wokuhlala nokuphila ukubuyisa isithunzi sethu.

8 SEPTEMBER 2018

Letter · Sindi Mkhize

My Family Needs Answers & Protection

For months my husband, S'bu Zikode, has been in grave danger after the threats made by Nelly Nyanisa, a senior member of the ruling party in the eThekweni Municipality, at an open meeting. Nyanisa said that my husband was making the city 'ungovernable' and threatened to 'deal with' the movement that he is elected to lead. It was also said that the movement, a democratic organisation with more than 50 000 members in Durban, and branches in five provinces, is a 'third force'.

Leadership of a movement like Abahlali baseMjondolo carries a high price. In 2006 my husband was arrested and severely assaulted in the Sydenham police station while I had to wait outside on the road, in the dark. This arrest and assault came after senior politicians said that the movement was a 'third force'.

In 2009 while my husband was visiting his mother in Estcourt our home in the Kennedy Road shack settlement was attacked and destroyed by armed members of the ruling party. I was alone at home with our children at the time. This attack came after senior politicians said that Abahlali baseMjondolo was a 'third force'. After our home was destroyed, along with the homes of many other leaders in the movement, a senior politician announced that the movement had been 'disbanded' and that it no longer existed. My husband had to go underground after the attack. For months the whole movement had to organise underground.

Today the movement is much, much bigger than it was in 2009. It has continued to grow despite assassinations in 2013 and 2014, and again this year. The movement is growing so far and so fast because it is a movement for and by the poor. It is a home for the oppressed.

The movement stands for land and freedom, and the dignity of all. It is democratic. This cannot be a threat to anyone who loves justice.

Today my husband is underground again. He is alone in a secret place. I find myself thrown into the wilderness and my family not protected. Life is not normal. Our children have to learn a new life of living without their father. They ask me questions that I do not know how to answer.

I have suffered a lot. I have to ensure that our children are safe at home and school, and to think about my husband's safety while I can't get in touch with him. The security of the household is now in my hands.

S'bu Zikode is not only the leader of the movement of the poor. He is also a husband and a father. Just as the communities of Abahlali baseMjondolo need him to come back, we also need him to come back to his family.

Our family members are still expecting the results of the internal investigation from the Municipality into Nyanisa's words. We will be very happy to get the results of the investigation. We hope that this will free our hearts and bring hope and trust.

I know that the oppressors can try to kill someone or to intimidate them. They have often killed. Our movement moves from funeral to funeral. Intimidation is a daily bread. But they cannot take his gift. If S'bu Zikode did not have a calling from God to lead poor people, our movement would have ended long ago. So many powerful people have tried to break our movement but it has not broken. So many powerful people have tried to destroy my husband but he has continued his work.

It is undeniable that everyone has the right to live in a comfortable environment with their family without being intimidated or threatened by anyone. We know members of the ruling party in this city do not have conscience when they say they will 'deal with' someone. Is it wrong to seek the truth and to struggle for the poor? Is it wrong to build communities from the ground up? Is it wrong to insist that the dignity of every person must be respected?

The report of the Moerane Commission of Inquiry has not been released. My husband stood in front of the Commissioner's crew and he did not fear to expose the corruption and killing against Abahlali leaders. We know this is one of the reasons why the eThekweni Municipality is openly saying they will not work with the Bahlali baseMjondolo organisation.

I hope this will be temporary, not seeing him for now, we cannot hear his voice but the truth is (izihlahla ziyakhuluma).

Psalm 23: 1-6. The words he loved so greatly strengthened him in difficult times.

Sindi Mkhize

10 JANUARY 2019

Interview · S'bu Zikode

Land Reform from Below

An edited excerpt, published by New Frame, from an interview first published by the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research as its eleventh dossier, December 2018

Tricontinental: Could you tell us how Abahlali started and how it has developed?

Zikode: Our movement was born in a shack settlement in Durban in 2005. The people from the Kennedy Road settlement in Clare Estate had been promised a piece of land for public housing. This land was sold to a private businessman for profit. The people took to the streets. We blockaded a major road in February 2005. When the elected representative responded by describing us as criminals and calling the police to attack us, we realised with shock that we were on our own. After this shock, a series of serious discussions were held in settlements across Clare Estate that resulted in the formation of the movement eight months later, in October 2005. When Abahlali was formed — this is a point that I always want to emphasise — there weren't any clever individuals that sat around the table and thought of building this movement. We built our movement out of anger, hunger and frustration. It was built out of need.

Most popular protests in South Africa use road blockades as a tactic. What is significant is that although there were so many protests around the country, we were able to sustain that protest and turn it into a movement. We did not only organise our locality. Neighbouring communities also got involved. They said, "We identify your demands with our demands. We can amplify our voices if we all unite". So, this unity was organic. This movement grew from anger to the table, not from the table to anger.

Related article: Naked without a home: An activist conversation

The movement started because of landlessness and because people were homeless. The question of land became central in our movement. When poor people come to cities, first of all they do not have jobs. If they do it is in domestic work, which doesn't pay much. As a result, people cannot afford to rent flats. What they tend to do is occupy a piece of land and build themselves shacks.

Now, why did we have to resort to land occupations? The state was not prepared to provide state-assisted housing. South Africa has a programme to build housing for free for the impoverished. But that scheme is often monopolised by politicians. You've got to pay bribes to get those homes. You've got to be very close to the local politicians to be put on to a list of people for those houses. At times, women have to undergo sexual harassment in exchange for getting on to the housing list. There is a lot of corruption in housing allocation. There was no clear plan or policy on the side of the cities as to who gets the housing and how. If there were to be policy, it would not be followed. They have lied to us. So, we feel that it is better for us to find ourselves a piece of land and occupy that piece of land.

Occupation as a political act to address the question of homelessness has always stemmed from a genuine need of people to occupy land to build houses for themselves. Obviously, there is a scarcity of housing. However, people do not want to remain homeless when there is plenty of land, irrespective of whether or not the government is prepared to give it to them legally. In South Africa, we come from a history of land dispossession through colonialism and apartheid. Land was dispossessed from the majority of black people. If you want to correct the imbalances of the past, you can't forget that there is this history that land was stolen from the black majority in South Africa. As a way to redress that, occupation becomes key. Because how do you buy something that belongs to you? That's the political intervention: we were dispossessed of our land. Now it is time to slowly, slowly get our land back.

TI: Could you tell us about the repression that your movement has faced?

Z: We are facing serious repression in South Africa, especially in Durban. A number of our comrades have been assassinated, and others have been murdered during protests and evictions. Everyone who joins our struggle accepts this risk. And we tell comrades from the onset that when they sign up to join Abahlali,

they could die. We have buried comrades. We continue to bury comrades. Comrades continue to take the risk because they do not want what is otherwise their fate — to die slowly, but surely, to die without dignity.

Related article: Sindi Mkhize: Living in the shadow of death

Our comrades are killed by the police during the protests and by the politicians and their hitmen, their gangsters. They are also killed by Anti-Land Invasion Units, which our cities developed to essentially become military formations against the poor. They have become extremely well-armed when dealing with their citizens. Politics has become a way to get rich and people are willing to kill or do anything to become rich and stay rich. We move from funeral to funeral.

We bury our comrades with the dignity that they were denied in life. Many of our comrades cannot sleep in their own homes or cannot leave their homes after dark in the so-called democratic post-apartheid South Africa. Repression comes in waves. There is violence and there is co-option. If they cannot kill us, they try to co-opt us into political parties and into non-governmental organisations.

TI: You mentioned that the shack dwellers movement came out of a spontaneous moment. How have you been able to sustain that and turn it into a movement? What structures has Abahlali developed that have helped sustain your movement?

Z: If you want to join Abahlali, we encourage you to speak to your family and your neighbourhood. It becomes your responsibility from the onset to organise a core group that we can come and present to. You invite us, even with a few people, and then we come and present what Abahlali is. We discourage people from joining Abahlali as individuals. It doesn't help us, and it doesn't help them either. So, you will invite us to your community and you organise your community before you become a part of Abahlali. And then, once we make our presentation, we leave the community to engage among itself and decide whether or not they want to join Abahlali as a block. One person signing up to Abahlali membership is not going to make a difference when people are facing evictions.

There must be a minimum of 50 members signing up to Abahlali. We do not rush to sign members up. It takes months or even years to join our movement. Democracy can be very slow and often very boring, and we have been very patient to live up to that. When the 50 members are reached, we come back again for what we call political education.

We do research prior to going to each place. We want to learn about the troubles faced by that community. We want to find out whether they face evictions and police brutality. We want to learn about the poverty and joblessness. We want our political education to be focused to their needs. We don't generalise. We must focus on why they wanted to join Abahlali in the first place.

18 May 2018: Sibusiso Zikode at the Abahlali baseMjondolo offices in downtown Durban.

TI: You have talked about the “psychological aspect” of Abahlali. Could you tell us what you mean by this?

Z: What I have learned from the areas in which I grew up is that poor people tend to not trust other poor people. For them to trust you, you must be well dressed, you must be driving a big car. Then they believe that you are a role model, you can be trusted. However, what we have learned from the very same smart people who drive big cars is that they are actually not role models. They lie to poor people. In fact, what makes them rich is the fact that they lie to people, they undermine people, they hide information, they are corrupt to maintain power.

From the psychological point of thinking, what Abahlali has been engaged in is to undo that form of thought. To say, look, the people that we were trusting the most because of how they dress, because of the cars they drive, they are actually not good people. Let's trust our own people who have nothing. But, of course, our people will have to demonstrate if they deserve our trust. That is part of what we have done.

I always make a point that our humanity should not be judged by our socioeconomic status, because that's misleading. If I drive a good car, if you are going to trust me, and you think I'm a better human being because I have a big house, you will miss the point. Judging people based on their socioeconomic status is always misleading. So that's what we teach the poor. To trust one another.

The forces that are fighting against us are man-made. They are not God-made. The reasons why people are kicked out of our cities is because of the policymakers and the authorities that we elect to power. These are people whose political views produce policies that prevent the people from getting access to homes. They are political by nature and therefore require political intervention. Because the forces are political, we need to get our political tools right.

Politics starts with the everyday lives of people. So, we must undertake political education that understands this. You cannot start with lots of political jargon. If you start with a debate over capitalism versus communism or socialism, then you confuse people on the ground. What does capitalism have to do with ordinary men and women who are homeless? That question needs to be explained from homelessness outwards. You have to start with homelessness, with the lack of water and the lack of electricity. Then you can explain the system, how the system of private property degrades the lives of the millions to benefit the few. You have to start with what people understand and then build the theory.

You can have brilliant ideas, but they will fail to become part of the masses if they are detached from people. These brilliant ideas will then have no impact on the world, will make no difference to people. Our popular education must be humble.

It must be geared to people of different backgrounds, including the educated. But the educated, including teachers, have to know that their knowledge should not give them permission to hijack the movement. The people have to move together. Our popular education has to build on that lesson.

For us, dignity is at the centre. Dignity is the ethical core. The dignity of human beings is universal and non-negotiable. It is the point from which resistance is built. Humans are dignified, and they demand to live in a dignified way.

Our struggle for dignity and for a dignified world is long and it is hard. It will not be achieved overnight. It may take years for us to win the question of land and to win on our other challenges. People will be beaten and even jailed. Lives will be lost. For this long struggle, we have to build the confidence, courage and determination of the masses. Popular education is key here.

Despite everything, our movement has not just survived, it has grown. And it continues to grow. We continue to occupy land, to build homes and to appropriate water and electricity. While the government, the political parties and some NGOs are debating how to achieve land reform from above, we are achieving land reform from below.

We have no choice but to live like dignified human beings.

13 SEPTEMBER 2019

Talk · S'bu Zikode

Urban Shack Settlements as a Site of Struggle

'Urban Activism: Staking Claims in the 21st Century City' conference, Harvard University, 13 September 2019

I am very honoured and humbled to be invited here at Harvard University to speak on Urban Activism. I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies who have invited me, and made it possible for organised shack dwellers in South Africa to be represented at this prestigious platform. I am also grateful to Abahlali baseMjondolo for entrusting me to speak here, and with this excellent opportunity for our movement.

When we take our place in our society we take it humble but firm. Today we take it here at Harvard. Just as we occupy land we also try to occupy our place in all discussions that are relevant to us and our lives.

We take our place here because we matter. We take our place here because we are ordinary people. We take it here because now, after years of organisation and struggle, we count because of the strength that we have built from below, and our voice is now counting. But many of us have terrible scars for insisting that impoverished people can think too.

Our cities are built and shaped by impoverished people and the working class. We are the majority in the cities. But many of the elites, in government, business and civil society, want us to remain in silence, in dark corners, while they talk for us and decide for us. When we insist on our dignity as human beings, on our equal capacity to think, and our equal right to participate in decisions that affect us, this insistence is often treated as a form of dangerous criminality or conspiracy.

We have also been treated as if we are beneath the law. In fact we live with the death penalty, and under an effective state of emergency. We can be slandered, beaten, have our homes and possessions destroyed and murdered with impunity.

There is a lot of joy and togetherness in our movement. We occupy land, build creches, halls and vegetable gardens. We celebrate victories. Our assemblies and rallies bring thousands of people together and include music, poetry and dance.

But we have also become experts in organising funerals. We have lost many leaders to assassinations and murder by the state and the ruling party. Since 2019 we have lost 18 militants. Many of our leaders have spent long periods under the threat of death.

The price for land is paid in blood.

We must also live with constant fires and floods. These are not natural disasters. They are a result of the contempt in which we are held by the elites.

Abahlali baseMjondolo

The organisation that I am mandated to represent here today has created a home, a space for political discussion, a voice and a political instrument for oppressed people for more than fourteen years. We began to organise ourselves outside of the ruling party because our hope for a better, more equal and more just society after apartheid was betrayed. The dreams and aspirations of well-known leaders like Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Emma Mashinini, Steve Biko and Robert Sobukwe were lost. Even more importantly the dreams and aspirations of millions more people, most of them ordinary impoverished and working class people whose names are not known to history, had been lost.

We found ourselves completely on our own, violently oppressed by a government that told the world that it had freed us. When we organised ourselves and politely asked them to talk to us they responded with violent repression. We had to rebuild the power of the impoverished through self-organisation, and we had to rebuild a vision of freedom and dignity from below.

Movement to the cities

In South Africa, like elsewhere in the world, millions of us impoverished people have migrated to cities for better possibilities for our lives in terms jobs, schools and universities, health care and the other opportunities that come with urban life. We have also moved to cities because our small towns and villages have not earned the same respect that cities have. Our small towns and villages are in decline. Factories are closing and services are collapsing. Small towns and villages have become areas of neglect and despair. There is no political will from the authorities to upset the economic system that has made us poor, and that keeps us poor. We call that system racial capitalism.

But while many people find more possibilities for their lives in the cities millions remain without any work. When there is work it is often precarious and highly exploited. You can work and remain poor. There are serious problems with addiction, depression, anxiety and violence.

Our children go to schools that are dangerous places where the level of education is shockingly bad.

The question of land, rural and urban, remains a crisis. We do have rural branches and we work closely with rural struggles, for instance the struggle to protect land against mining companies. Many of our members are involved in struggle in the cities and in their rural homes. In the cities the housing question is also a land question. When the government has built houses they have often built them far outside of the cities, in peripheral wastelands that we call 'human dumping grounds'.

We have had to insist on well located urban land for housing, and that the social value of urban land must be placed before its commercial value. But we don't only have to confront the market and the power of capital. We also have to confront the politicians who always put their own interests before those of the people. Our impoverishment is an opportunity for them to get rich through tenders. Our struggle is against capital, the politicians and the state.

Cities are becoming more exclusionary places rather than more democratic and inclusionary places. It is very important to repeat and to stress that attempts by people who are impoverished and mostly black to be included in decision-making have been seen as a conspiracy and met with hostility, including slander and violence. Surveillance, intimidation, assassination and torture are being used to control impoverished people.

For many impoverished people access to job opportunities and development requires that one must be ready to pay a bribe or that one must be a member of the ruling party. To really advance one must be somehow connected to those in high authorities or structures of the ruling party. Some NGOs operate in the same way. This is not the world we have imagined.

It is estimated that more than 60% of our world population live in cities. This number is still growing. On the one hand our cities are unable to keep up with the movement of people coming to cities. Our cities' infrastructure is so bad, and so commodified, that it is unable to accommodate this movement of people migrating to cities in search of a better life. It is most unfortunate that the working class and poorest of the poor who have actually built our cities have no right to these cities. When we say that we support the right to the city we don't just mean the right to live in the cities. We also mean that we should be able to participate in planning the cities, in making them more democratic places.

Land occupations

Abahlali unapologetically occupy vacant and unused land in our cities. We occupy land to build homes for our families because we know that we deserve a place in our cities too. It is unfortunate that we are compelled to build our homes whether we have jobs or no jobs. That is how shack settlements are built. Often they are built from the waste of the city – pallets, advertising boards, even election posters.

Our occupations give us well located land for housing, and we can build other community infrastructure like creches, halls and gardens. They also give us a space from which we can build self-managed and democratic communities. In our occupations we insist that no distinction is made between people on the basis of which province or country they come from, or which language they speak. A neighbour is a neighbour, and a comrade is a comrade.

The politicians try as hard as they can to turn us against each other in order to weaken us. They always try and create the idea that we are impoverished because of other poor people. Our unity is our strength and we have to do all that we can to build unity. We work, from a base in the occupations, to build democratic popular power from below.

The majority of the residents in our occupations are women, and the majority of the members of our movement are women. Our society has been convulsed by terrible violence against women, as well as migrants. We work as hard as we can to oppose this and to ensure that we build women's power in our movement and in our society. We are also fully committed to the equality, respect and safety of all LGBTIQ+ comrades. Full and equal human dignity is non-negotiable.

However, each time we occupy land and build our homes we are confronted with state violence. The state has gone so far as to militarise itself against the organisation of the impoverished whose struggle is to build our homes and our cities. In the case of Durban the Anti-Land Invasion Unit has been created to maintain the apartheid urban planning patterns where impoverished black people have no right to the city. Military armoured vehicles, first designed for the colonial war in Angola, and then used by the American military in Iraq, have been purchased to be used against us. In Johannesburg the "Red Ants" have become a death squad. In Cape Town the so called Law Enforcement Agencies are defending huge land for the rich. The impoverished are squashed into small pieces of land with no water and sanitation.

The Road Ahead

What kind of democracy are we living in when the oppressed are governed with military force and day to day state violence? This is an important question, and one which most of the media and civil society are not seriously interested in. We insist on a democracy for everyone, not just on paper but also in reality.

Constant state violence has encouraged us to organise the unorganised and resist all forms of degradation. Poverty, unemployment, injustice and inequality have compelled us to struggle for cities for all. In 2018 our audited membership, all in good standing, passed 50 000 people. We have continued to grow since then, and now organise in five provinces. Joining our movement takes time. It is a slow and careful process. This is what is required when you are serious about building organisation.

Building this movement has not been easy. We have faced many sites of resistance across the elite – not only from the state but from regressive civil society, academia, the media, etc. Many of these forces believed that impoverished people cannot think for themselves. We have encountered severe class and race

prejudices from people who say that they are progressive, and who had built personal empires around the representation of the struggles of the oppressed in South Africa to NGOs and academics in North America and Western Europe. Some of these people saw our self-organisation as a direct threat to their own power.

However we have won that argument by building and sustaining a movement, despite severe repression, and becoming the largest popular movement in post-apartheid South Africa. Today no one can seriously deny the scale and power of our movement. We are constantly in the streets, in the courts, organising rallies of thousands in football grounds, and in the national media, including radio and television.

We won that argument when we insisted on the living politic and the politic of dignity. Today our struggle has fought many battles and won many victories in the courts, in the streets, in the land occupations and in the battle of ideas.

After many years of having to struggle on our own at home we are also now building alliances with trade unions outside of the ANC as well as street traders, flat dwellers, migrants groups and other progressive movements of the oppressed. We always work to build as much living solidarity as we can between the oppressed and to support others to organise themselves. We have also built alliances with radical movements elsewhere in the world, especially the MTST and MST in Brazil but also with comrades in many other countries including Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Turkey, Mexico and elsewhere. We work, at home, and internationally, to build an alliance of progressive movements.

Today as global economic apartheid intensifies much of our hope for a better future lies with the urban poor. In many countries around the world the most vibrant struggles, often with women in the majority, are being organised from the cities. The land occupation, the road blockade and democratic self-organisation and management have become important tactics around the world.

Our hope for the future lies with the democratic self-organisation of the very people who are disrespected and treated with indignity.

However, I must repeat that the struggle of shack dwellers in urban spaces has not been easy. We face violent evictions at a gun point, without court orders or any regard for the law. We have rebuilt after each every eviction. It is not unusual for a settlement to have to be rebuilt more than thirty times before the land is won. We have been beaten, arrested, tortured in police custody,

slandered in the media and killed by the police, the land invasion units, Metro police, local councillors and their izinkabi (hitmen). Many of these cases have not been investigated and therefore there are no arrests or justice. Despite severe repression the movement has continued to grow dramatically in recent years. Land occupations, road blockades, the strategic use of media, strategic use of the courts, regular assemblies and discussions, and democratic mass mobilisation have become the key tools for the movement to advance its agenda. Although the price of land in urban centres continues to be paid in blood many victories have been won by popular organisation and mobilisation.

We don't know what the future holds. But we do know that for our children we have no choice but to remain committed to the struggle for a world in which land, wealth and power are fairly shared, a world in which the dignity of every person is respected.

24 OCTOBER 2019

Speech · S'bu Zikode

25 years of democracy has been paid in blood

Constitutional Dialogue of the National Foundations Dialogue Initiative, Parliament, Cape Town, 24 October 2019

There is no doubt that in 1994 we all had high hopes in the political leadership of a black majority government in our country. Many promises were made and many promises were broken. Many people who came to work for government decided to work to enrich themselves. We were shocked to realise that impoverished communities on the ground just became voting specialists. Many of us started to organise communities to build unity and enabling environment for government to deliver to its promises. We did not just fold our arms and waited for hand outs. We registered NPOs and ran drop in centres, early child development centres. We ran community gardens and feeding schemes and worked with local business to feed and find employment for our communities. We remained passionate and patriotic to our communities and to our country. While we worked hard to democratise our settlements. We committed ourselves to the project of nation building as envisaged by Nelson Mandela and others. We were inspired by the values of our constitutional democracy and held our flag so high.

We knew that change was not going to be easy. We also knew that the damages of the past were not going to go away any time soon. We also thought the pain we experienced in the hands of the white minority government was the pain of the past.

We were very clear with our responsibilities as impoverished communities – at least to love our country and contribute to peace building, unity and harmony. However, local politicians were always prepared to lie to us and treat us like children. Lies were put before the truth. The commercial value of land was put before its social value. Many of us suffered in poverty and indignity without jobs and without hope. We had no choice but to come to the cities and occupy vacant and unused land, only to pay a high price for that.

After 25 years of democracy shack dwellers live in mud like pigs without access to basic services. There is hardly any water and sanitation in shack settlements. There is no road access, no refuse collection. There is no electricity and as a result people use candles and paraffin stoves which often explode causing shack fires. We have lost lives in shack fires, we have lost mainly children in these shack fires and the state does not see this as a crisis. Our lives have been lived under a state of emergency but none of the organs of the state has ever recognised that.

During 25 years in democracy the self-organising of impoverished communities has been seen as some form of conspiracy. This is done to justify violence on us. Organising outside the ruling party and the state has cost us lives. We have lost 18 housing activists since 2009 when insisted that land and wealth must be shared. Many of us have scars just for insisting that impoverished people count in our society.

Brutal and unlawful evictions continue to terrorise our communities. The organised izinkabi like Land Invasion Unit of eThekweni, the banned Red Ants of the City of Johannesburg and Law Enforcement Agencies of City of Cape Town have subverted the law and use violent force on landless people. We have lost lives under the operations of these izinkabi. This is what happen when the political leadership has been replaced by gangster politicians. This is what happen when a democratic state is replaced by a police state.

So, the democracy achieved in 1994 was never for impoverished people. It became the opportunity for the politicians and elites to enrich themselves at the expense of millions of people of South Africa. The question of land and the right to the cities were never resolved. We were never allowed to participate in decision making with regards to our lives and communities, and when we organised to insist on our right to participate in this democracy we were presented as the “third force”, slandered and violently repressed by the state and the ruling party. Local politicians eventually became dangerous figures in our communities, *sesiyawasaba amakhansela*. Our cities were taken over by gangster mayors and politicians. Their izinkabi were ready to kill those that expose and oppose corruption. We lost many leaders to assassinations. Our leaders have often been murdered with impunity.

Our effort to write to both the Minister of Police, Honourable Cele and His Excellency the President of the Republic failed. Today the eThekweni municipality has spent over 4 billion buying military vehicles called casspirs, when people in shacks have no basic services and people in rural areas have no hope for a better future.

We welcome all the action taken against political gangsterism, and political assassinations of politicians. Although the assassination of housing activists is accepted as normal and no investigation is being seriously undertaken. But we also note that the state has always ruled us with violence and illegality. Today, 25 years after the end of apartheid, violent and unlawful evictions remain a daily bread for impoverished people. People continue to be murdered by the state during these evictions, and when they organise to resist.

Instead of democratising in order to build more inclusive cities and more inclusive forms of decision making, our cities are militarising. Impoverished people are increasingly ruled with militarised forms of force. This is partly why some communities resort to violence and burn infrastructure. It is because they have learnt from the best. None of the authorities have time to genuinely engage with communities on their demands. Instead they just send the police who were actually not there when certain promises were made. The Land Invasion Unit for instance burns the belongings of people during illegal evictions. They have made this their “City by laws policy”. This must come to an end. They have demolished shacks while babies are inside the shacks and they get away with this form of brutality.

Our cities have a detailed plans on how to eradicate shacks but they have no clear plan of how they can actually upgrade shack settlements and improving the lives of dwellers.

We often talk about violence perpetrated by men against women and children, violence on migrant communities and LGBTIQ+ communities, which is welcome and important, but we never deliberate on violence perpetrated by state organs against impoverished and vulnerable people.

However, one thing to appreciate is that Abahlali communities have organised and created our own democracy from below. A democracy that recognises every human being. A democracy that respect every human life. A democracy that encourages participation in decision making. A democracy that celebrate women’s power and is committed to self-management.

Although we have deep scars and remain marginalised, today we have a place called home because of our own courage and inkani. Today, we remain a people's movement and the largest to have emerged in post-apartheid South Africa. Our movement carries the values and treasure of our constitutional democracy and we work hard to build the future we want while we defend our gains. Ubuhlali is our joy and pride that can be used to advance our constitutional democracy as we look forward to the future. After almost 15 years of struggle we remain committed to building radical democracy from below. The wealth, the cities and land must be shared. The right to participate in discussions and to make decisions must be shared. This is the mission that confronts our generation.

12 NOVEMBER 2019

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Challenges of Internationalism, Solidarity and Integration of Peoples

People's BRICS meeting, Brasília, 12 November 2019

Thank you Programme Director. May I take this opportunity to thank the International Secretariat for creating this space for us. I see this space as an instrument full of possibilities and hope for a better world, a world that we want and for which we are all prepared to fight. May I also thank all comrades from Pan Africa Today who have always counted us, the uncounted, in this difficult journey for a world we want, a world in which we all live like human beings.

In recent years we have had a close and important relationship with the MST, the movement of the landless here in Brazil, and many of our comrades have travelled to Brazil to spend time with the MST, and to participate in the MST political school. Our struggles to put the social value of land before its commercial value have much in common. We deeply appreciate the solidarity from the MST and our movement shares in your joy at the release of Lula.

The shack dwellers of South Africa have been subject to the brutal forces of capitalism and political gangsterism that have taken over our public institutions and cities. The result has been impoverishment, rule by violence, exclusion from the cities and a system that murders those who stand up for their human dignity, and for justice. Those of us who are still here have been lucky to survive this system.

When our struggle began fifteen years ago those who are paid to claim to represent us in the ruling party and in NGOs ('civil society') treated our movement as some kind of criminal conspiracy. As a democratic formation we learnt how difficult and painful it is to be struggling on your own. We faced and survived severe repression on our own. In the blood and fire of this repression we took a deliberate decision to work with labour movements and other progressive and democratic formations in South Africa, and everywhere in the world where we can build solidarity. We have had to identify potential comrades, and possibilities for solidarity, nationally, regionally and internationally.

We understand the danger of being a referee and a player in the struggle like we are facing. We understand the danger of wanting to be the only voice in the struggle of the working class. We also understand the danger of wanting to be the only hero in the time where internationalism is necessary. But capitalism is a global force. Imperialism is a global force. There can be no advancement for the impoverished majority of the world if our struggle is not also global. We seek to build solidarity in humility, a living solidarity in which an injury to one is an injury to all.

We know how it feels to be living under the shadow of death, not knowing if one will still be alive when the sun sets each evening and shines each morning. But we also know that while living under these pressures we need to keep the wider world in mind, and to continue to link our struggles and share ideas.

It took us a very long time to understand the politic of frustration and marginalisation from the general public and sometimes from families. We built our movement on a politic of listening and this politic can also help us to build international solidarity.

Our movement and our different struggles were built with conscious and deliberate action. We did not just grow out of nowhere. Building strong movements sometimes require us to engage in an out of order politic. It requires us to be humane and gentle. It requires us to begin to practise to live the kind of world we want. It requires us to swallow our pride so that our future generations can live better. At the same time it requires us to stand very firm against evil forces that are determined to keep us in the shadow of poverty. It is for this reason that we cannot be soft when the system is not soft on us. We have been able to build our communities and movements across our own nations. Now is the time to build global solidarity across cities, provinces, regions and states. There is no better time than this. The world is witnessing brutal forms of exploitation accompanied by violent dispossession both in rural and urban areas.

The indigenous people, the impoverished and the working class suffer the most. There is no doubt that our diverse struggles are all facing common global forces and interests that often gain from the impoverishment and dispossession of others. Just as the economic monster is globalising, we must unite and build a global resistance. Lula must know that he will always have a home in our land occupations, whether they are in Sao Paulo or Durban. Bolsonaro must know that he will face resistance in the streets from Brasilia to Pretoria.

In order to build unity and international solidarity we will have to be very honest about ourselves with a clear examination of both our strength and our

weaknesses. We must organise with great humility to be taken seriously and be listened to. The deep value of ubuntu must be used to destroy the commodification of social services and land. Our praxis must reflect the values of ubuntu which points directly to the society we want. We must be able to master and speak the language of the indigenous people and the people we serve. International solidarity can be successful when it is backed by the real struggles of the people on the ground. A people to people solidarity can be genuine and can break the walls of distance and languages.

For example, a few years ago Abahlali used to have days of solidarity with comrades from Haiti through video and deep discussion on their struggles and challenges. By the time we were done we all felt to have been to Haiti and felt deeply connected to their struggle. We have done similar solidarity work with our comrades from the DRC through our alliance work with the Congolese Solidarity Campaign. We have also built solidarity with comrades in Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Turkey, and, of course, Brazil. Our experience shows that it very possible for all of us to connect one way or the other with our diverse struggles against capitalism.

Internationalism is likely to succeed when we can practically connect our struggles nationally, regional and internationally. We must share programmes of action in our respective regions and nations. We must develop systemic solidarity mechanism with a special focus on people to people solidarity. We must question the morality of profit amid deepening inequalities and poverty. We must insist on our rights and freedom and not development goals that favour market driven agendas. We must demand substantive equality. Land, wealth and power must be shared. We need to build a living communism rooted in the lives and struggles of the oppressed.

When it comes to building international solidarity the use of language that is far removed from the people on the ground is a serious cause for concern. We need to build a common language of struggle that can connect a land occupation in Sao Paulo to a land occupation in Durban, and a road blockade in South Africa to a road blockade in Haiti. In the past another serious problem was that all the opportunities for building international solidarity were captured and monopolised by NGOs. Popular movements were excluded. Now, as life becomes harder and oppression becomes more and more brutal, it is vital that we build and sustain direct forms of solidarity between popular struggles and movements.

6 APRIL 2020

Essay · Thapelo Mohapi

State violence against the poor is not the solution

Published in the Daily Maverick

It is vital that the government immediately begins to include the organisations of the poor and the working class in all Covid-19 planning and implementation. If they don't do this, and continue to criminalise the poor, the result will be a huge breakdown in trust, and massive conflict.

An insert recently screened on SABC revealed an important reality about the Covid-19 outbreak. A journalist was interviewing residents of a shack settlement in Johannesburg about the pandemic. One of the men he spoke to said it was difficult to understand anything when your stomach is empty. He then asked the journalist for R20 to buy bread. The journalist, taken aback, replied that he was working. His interviewee, who usually makes his living selling scrap metal, replied that the journalist was very lucky to be working.

The reality is that for many people who make a living in the informal sector it will be impossible to survive the rest of the 21 days without being able to earn any money. It will also be impossible for people who share a one-roomed shack with six or seven others, and have no water, sanitation or refrigeration in their shack to stay at home for 21 days. For millions of poor people, it is just not possible to adhere to the rules of the lockdown.

Unsurprisingly, a number of experts have argued that the Covid-19 pandemic will hit the shack settlements in the cities of the global South, where more than a billion people live, the hardest. These places are highly congested, haven't been provided with adequate water and sanitation, and their residents often lack access to adequate nutrition and healthcare.

It has been argued that in countries like South Africa, India and Brazil this may make it almost impossible to contain the spread of the virus. There have been two types of response to this situation.

One response has been new forms of cross-class solidarity as the middle classes and elites realise that their future cannot be separated from the lives of the poor.

But another response has taken the form of new forms of repression as the middle classes and elites try to separate themselves from the poor.

Around the world we are seeing both kinds of responses from within society and from states. Before the pandemic, a post from Abahlali baseMjondolo on Facebook about evictions would be unlikely to be seen by more than 10,000 people. But a recent post about evictions in Durban had been seen by close to 300,000 people at the time of writing on Saturday afternoon. We have also seen government rapidly installing taps and JoJo tanks in settlements that had previously been denied water. These developments indicate that there are possibilities for new forms of solidarity in this crisis.

However, we have also seen new forms of violence and abuse directed at poor black people. There have been serious abuses from private security companies, the police and the army, including horrifically violent evictions from shack settlements in Durban.

On Friday it was reported that the police had killed six people since the lockdown started, and that there had also been a further two deaths in police custody, making the police, at that point, more lethal than the virus. We have seen similar abuses in India and Kenya.

Things may well get worse in South Africa if the government actually attempts to implement its plans to move tens of thousands of people out of their homes with the aim of “de-densifying” shack settlements. This could lead to massive conflict between the state and the poorest people in the country.

State violence against the poor is not the solution to this crisis. In a country where almost 30% of the population is unemployed (the majority of whom are from rural areas and shack settlements) their survival depends on them being able to wake up every day and seek food. Those who sell fruit and vegetables on the streets will be heavily affected as their stock rots. They will have no means to order new stock as they would have used all their money to buy food for their households.

The unemployed person who sits on the side of the road and waits for someone to pick them up to do construction work for the day will also be seriously affected. The closure of schools has made the situation worse for many poor

people as it puts more strain on families when it comes to food. We could quickly reach a tipping point at which many poor people are more afraid of dying from starvation than the virus itself. State violence will not stop parents from looking for food for their children.

The organisations of the poor and the working class were not included when the plans for the lockdown were made. Much of what the government has said seems to assume that everyone lives in a large house, with water, sanitation and a fridge, and that everyone can rely on getting a monthly salary. It is vital that the government immediately begins to include the organisations of the poor and the working class in all planning and implementation. If they don't do this, and continue to criminalise the poor, the result will be a huge breakdown in trust, and massive conflict.

The government needs to work with the organisations of the poor and the working class to come up with ways to support rather than to repress the poor. For a start, the moratorium on evictions must be strictly enforced. The municipality in eThekweni, which has gone rogue and is subjecting poor people to brutally violent evictions every day, needs to be brought to order as a matter of national urgency.

The rollout of water and sanitation must be rapidly expanded and undertaken in partnership with community organisations.

The food parcels that are always available when elections come around must be made available, at scale, to people who will have no income during the lockdown. This is critically important because without food, compliance with the rules of the lockdown will be impossible for millions of people.

The existing pensions and grants systems must be used to direct money to the poor in the form of special crisis grants. Those who are most vulnerable in this crisis should be seen as those who require the most support, and not as people to be humiliated, beaten or even murdered by the police.

The plan to “de-densify” shack settlements is dangerous. The reality is that it is the failure of the state since 1994 that has forced millions of people to live in overcrowded and underserviced shack settlements. We are in this situation because the government has failed to address the housing crisis. Covid-19 has exposed that failure and created a situation in which that failure puts the whole of society at risk. The state must acknowledge this and act with some humility. It cannot continue to treat poor people as it has for the last 25 years.

For 25 years the state has refused to engage in democratic decision-making processes with the poor before making decisions that affect their lives. When dealing with the poor the approach by the government has normally been top-down and brutal. It is no exaggeration to say that the state has often criminalised poverty and engaged with poor people at gunpoint.

This has to stop, immediately.

The only viable way through this crisis is a path rooted in solidarity with the poor and the working class, including a democratic partnership with the organisations of the poor and the working class.

Any attempt to deal with the crisis with violence, repression and the criminalisation of poverty will result in a huge breakdown in trust, and debilitating social conflict. It will be a road to disaster.

24 SEPTEMBER 2020

Lecture · No author given

Isifundo sika Thuli Ndlovu

Thuli Ndlovu Lecture, 24 September 2020

Mphathi wohlelo, baholi babahlali baseMjondolo kuwo wonke amazinga, omama, instha. Ngokukhethekile ngibingelele imindeni yamaqhawe ethu, mama Ndlovu, mama Mpeku, mama Ngcobo, mama Sizani, mama Dlamini,

Namhlanje usuku olukhulu nolubalulekile emlandweni woMbutho wabahlali lapho sikhumbula khona amaqhawe ethu anikela ngezimpilo zawo ukuze mina nawe nabantwana bethu siphile kangcono.

U September akusiyo inyanga enhle kithina bahlali baseMjondolo, kumele silalele kahle:

Mhlaka 26-27 September 2009 uMbutho wawunama hhovisi okuqala emjondolo yaku Kennedy Rd lawa sungulwa khona. Ngalolusuku kwahlaselwa lama hhovisi kwahlaselwa namakhaya abaholi baba hlali e Kenndy, kwalimala abantu, kwashona abantu ababili.

Ngomhlaka 26 June 2013 uSihlalo wabahlali base cator Crest owayeqavile uNkululeko Gwala wadutshulwa washona ngesihluku esesabekayo. Lokhu kwenzeka emva kwa mahora ambalwa emva komhlangano wabaholi abaqavile be ANC okwakhukhona owayengu Sihlalo wayo eThekwini Region u Sbhongiseni Dlomo nowayeyi Meyi yeTheku u James Nxumalo.

Ngomhlaka 30 September 2013, emashini yabahlali base Cator Crest eyayi nokuthula, iphoyisa u Constable Ndlovu wadubula wabulala u Nqobile Nzuza, umntwana owayeneminyaka engu 17 vo efunda eBonela High. Kulobo bumnyama kwabe sekuboshwa owayengu Nobhala wabahlali u Bandile Mdlalose.

Mhlaka 29 September 2014 owayengu Sihlalo wabahlali KwaNdengezi u Thuli Ndlovu wadutshulwa wabulawa ngamakhansela amabili e ANC, uMduduzi Christian Nqola Ngcobo, Luvelile Lutyeku nenkabi yabo u Ndlovu. Babe sebegwetshwa udilika jele, bayadonsa nje sikhuluma.

Mhlaka 13 June 2017, Amaphoyisa kamasipala wase Thekwini adubula abulala u Samuel Hloele wase Kukhanyeni eseneminyaka ewu 29 vo kade ezodiliza imizi yabahlali

Mhlaka 19 November 2017, u Sihlalo wabahlali base Sisonke, uSibonelo Mpeku wabulawa ngesikhulu isihluku esekhaya lakhe eSisonke.

Ngomhlaka 22 May 2018 owayengu Sihlalo wabahlali baseKukhanyeni uSifiso Ngcobo wadutshulwa washona esemzini wakhe ekukhanyeni.

Akusibo laba kuphela bahlali, bangu 18 sebe bonke, babe bulawa ngamaphoyisa ase Ningizimu Afrika, u Metro police, u Land Invasion unit, amakhansela e ANC nezinkabi zawo.

Uma uThuli engavuka namhlanje angathini nge branch yakhe yaKwaNdengezi? Engabe umphakathi wakhe uthini ngomawakhe nabantwana bakhe abasele bodwa?

Uma uSbonelo Mpeku engavuka namhlanje ebona abahlali bengasekho kwakubakhona eSisonke yena efele ubala angalila.

Uma Sifiso uNgcobo engavuka namhlanje angathini ngomphakathi awulwela waze wanikela ngempilo yakhe? Engabe umphakathi nabaholi bakhe bake bazihluphe ukuzwa nje ukuthi umntwana wakhe uqhuba njani esikoleni? Ulala edleni? Engabe lobuhlali bobuntu esibufundisa lapha buyenzeka emphakathini yabahlali?

Bahlali asizibuze ukuthi siyibonga ngani lemindeni eyanikela ngezimpilo zawo, ukuze thina sithole umhlaba, lo esesihlezi ngoku nethezeka kuwo namhlanje?

Zimbili izipho esinganikela ngaso uma sineqiniso, neqiniso likhona kithi ukuthi:

- 1. Ayikwazi ukulamba lemindeni sikhona, thina esashiyelwa umhlaba okuyifa laphakade singabi nandaba futhi singazihluphi.

Azingapheli izinyanga ezintathu singahlanganisanga njengomphakathi siyovela siyikhumbule lemindeni. Ngokwenza njalo siyobe senza ubuhlali uqobo. Nginovalo uma singakwenzi lokhu, ngoba kuzoshokuba ukuthi nathi siyothi uma sihamba emhlabeni abantwana bethu badlile udaka.

- 2. Okwesibili esingakwenza ukuhlonipha lamaqhawe ethu kanye nemindeni yawo, ukuthi sisebenze ngokuzikhandla nangokuthembeka ukuqhubeka lapho babegcine khona ukuze ikusasa labantwana bethu, nezwe lethu kube ngeliqhakazile.

Asisukume siyofuna izidingo zethu komasipala, asisukume siyofuna umhlaba, siwuvikele lona esesihleli kuwo ngayo yonke indlela. Asisukume siye emgwaqeni siyofuna imali edliwe kwama sipala obekumele isihlinzeke ngezidingo nebekumele isihlinzeke ngokudla ekhishwe u Social Development kulesikhathi se Covid-19.

Asisukume silwe nodlame olubhekiswe komama nabantwana, sibavikele ngayo yonke indlela. Sivikele abantu abasuka kwamanye amazwe, abasizo izitha zethu. Izitha zethu uhulumeni wama bhunu amnyama, ongxiwankulu abacashe ngaphansi kwama sudu. Izitha zethu yilabo abasidilizelayo, izitha zethu yilabo abantshonstha imali ka hulumeni okufanele engabe isiza thina. Izitha zethu yilabo abasavotela amasela nezinkabi ezisibulalayo.

Amandla!!!

30 SEPTEMBER 2020

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Opening Remarks to the 68th Session of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 30 September 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson, members of the ESCR-Net and the Committee for the ESCR for affording us with such an important platform to express our concerns.

Across the world residents of the shack settlements, many of which are in fact land occupations, are not recognized as human beings who can think for themselves. We are not treated with respect and dignity, or taken seriously. We are treated as if we are beneath the law. The state often engages us with violence rather than discussion. Some NGOs and some media have presented us to the world as criminals. For too long we have been living in substandard housing conditions, with no access to water and sanitation. For too long we have been denied access to roads. We have been denied refuse collection and electricity provision. The failure to provide electricity has caused regular shack fires in shack settlements resulting in the loss of many lives. We live, year after year, like pigs in the mud in the summer when it rains, and with fire after fire in the winter.

When state assisted housing and job opportunities are provided they are allocated along party lines. In the case of South Africa, if you are not connected to people in power you do not get a job or house in our shanty towns. If you stand up to this you will be at a very high risk of violence.

For too long local politicians have become dangerous figures in our communities in the name of leadership, law and order. Our movement has lost 18 activists who have been murdered. Some have been murdered by local politicians of the ruling African National Congress, some have been murdered by the state and its police. Some have been murdered by municipality's land invasion units and by private security companies. Recently we have been subject to sustained violence from Calvin and Family Security Company. Across the world,

activists are targeted and attacked for demanding social justice and decent living conditions.

For too long our efforts to organize the oppressed and build the democratic power of the oppressed has been met with state violence. Organizing outside the state and the ruling party has been criminalized. If we take democracy seriously we are met with violence.

We have been denied access to well-located urban land where we can be closer to areas of active economic opportunities, we can have access to health care facilities and our children can have access to better education. Globally, states are prioritizing economic and political interests over basic human needs.

We are implementing a programme of land reform from below with organized land occupations. But this is a difficult and dangerous politic. Grassroots urban planning is not recognized by the state and they use all forms of violence to try and crush it.

What we need is for the allocation of land to be removed from state and capitalist control and to be organized on a democratic basis. There should be a total decommodification of land. Land was not bought and sold before colonialism and it should not be bought and sold now.

For too long brutal and illegal evictions have been terrorizing communities, even during a pandemic that requires us to stay at home for public health reasons. We therefore demand an end to all evictions in our cities. We demand an end to all land dispossession, utilities cut offs and related attacks on the poor.

The politicians continue to try and divide the oppressed by turning neighbour against neighbour with xenophobia and other forms of prejudice and discrimination. All progressive movements must do all that they can to oppose this. The strength of the oppressed lies in our unity.

State corruption is a great threat to future stability in our countries. We demand an end to all state corruption that has robbed our communities of the right to access all economic, social and cultural rights as enshrined in the international laws and standards.

Land, wealth and power must be shared equally. The right to housing and a life lived in dignity must be guaranteed for all. We call this a living communism, a politic in which every person counts as a person, the dignity of every human is respected, there are no more human borders and the brutal centuries during which colonialism and capitalism have drenched the world in blood are finally brought to an end.

3 OCTOBER 2020

Talk · Simthembile Zikode

Talk at the ‘Sifike kanjani la?’ Seminar

‘Sifike kanjani la?’ seminar, 3 October 2020

Good day to everyone. I’m sure you are all wondering who is this handsome young gentleman in front of you.

My name is Simthembile Zikode. I was born in Kennedy Road and I am the son of the President of Abahlali baseMjondolo. Most importantly I’m 15 years old, which is the main agenda of the day because tomorrow Abahlali will be turning 15 years old.

I’m grateful for this opportunity to share my experience within the struggle. I was born in 2005 in Kennedy Road, that was the year that AbM was formed.

Growing up in a shack settlement is definitely something I experienced. But, as many of you know, me and family had a harsh departure from Kennedy in 2009 while I was still at a young age. It involved a lot of violence.

As a young boy I was a Daddy’s boy. I went everywhere with him. I followed him everywhere where he went and people joked that I was his bodyguard. As his bodyguard I attended meetings with him. I got to socialize with hundreds and hundreds of people. I still remember some of the leaders of AbM used to change my napkin while my dad was addressing a meeting or saying his speeches. With all of this as I travelled between all these meetings I started having hundreds of fathers, hundreds of mothers, and brothers and sister. Being with Abahlali opened my mind. It taught me discussions.

In 2010 Abahlali’s popularity was over the limit which forced the leaders to travel around the world and share their ideas behind their struggle. My Dad was also one of those who was forced to leave us multiple times for these such international visits. With my father being gone I would ask where he had gone, for how long will he be there, and when he is coming back because as his bodyguard I needed to know.

When I received the name of the country I would try figure out in which part of the world he was, and what I could learn about that country. This led to

me drawing flags. I drew flags like crazy. I had no internet and I had no phone at all so drawing flags was the first thing on my list. So Abahlali taught me about different parts of the world as well as the hardships we as the oppressed share with other people and activists around the world.

Growing up me and family moved to different places multiple times. I recall once a news reporter came by our house and asked me where the Zikode house was. As a very smart kind I knew my Dad's number and everything else. With confidence I pointed our house. Then the journalist asked if I know S'bu Zikode. Again with confidence I said yes that's my father. Then the journalist asked where is he and with confidence I said his always busy with the struggle. Then the journalists took his phone and asked me for my Dad's number. And with confidence he asked for the number. I sang out the number and the journalist said thanks. As a kid who was taught respect I told me that I'll let my Dad know he was there and then the guy drives away.

Not even a week and a photo of the house where we have moved after the attack in 2009 appeared in a newspaper (the Sunday Tribune) exposing where we live so we very quickly moved to a different house, in a new secret location. As a young person I was confused as to why are we moving from our own home just because a person published our home photo to the public. My main question towards my Dad that I never asked was why are journalists wanting to talk to you and most importantly who are you cause since I was young attending Abahlali meetings I didn't understand what was the meaning of the meetings. I didn't understand the agenda behind the meetings.

But I started growing up which answered a million thoughts and questions. When I was around 12 years old a year I started listening to what they were saying at meetings, and hearing them saying Amandla (Power) and they Awethu ngenkani (is ours by force), I would hear them say that they demand land, houses and dignity.

At about age 13 I started learning more about the reasons why Abahlali kept saying that they wanted to build their power to get land, houses and dignity. I started doing my own research as to why our government is not providing quality services, proper water and sanitation to the people.

In my home we housed many activists from around the world, including Abahlali members and leaders. Staying with them they've all taught me how they live, how they tend to socialize with society it itself, how they eat, their

religion and their culture. I have learnt a million things from all these activists and from the Abahlali members and leaders.

At home we've also housed eye witnesses to repression who are in danger. We've taken care of injured people. All these people have taught me different things about life and Abahlali has taught me Ubuntu (humanity) one step at a time. I'm grateful.

I've got to see the way that people co-operate. I've learned to treat all people the same way regardless of their colour or their background, I've got to see truth behind politics. There are people who I used to call my Fathers within the movement and I don't see them anymore. Abahlali has taught me the importance of loyalty. Abahlali has taught me the true meaning of the word comrade, and when and how to use the word.

They are many bad experiences that have made me wanna know more. I've digged into my father's stuff. I've seen him write letters to people who lead this country begging them to assist Abahlali with many things like to acknowledge their rights, to help with protection and most importantly just to recognise Abahlali's struggle. I have seen my father work and work to stop the assassinations that Abahlali members face.

The assassinations came from the very same people who are supposed to be leading and protecting society. As a child it hurt me to see this happen. It hurt to see that we have a government of liars and criminals. But Abahlali has never lied to me or misguided me. Abahlali has shown me the truth and only the truth about the circumstances we live in.

Abahlali has inspired me to shoot for the stars. Abahlali is a movement of constant learning and they have inspired me to learn more than I'm given.

My advice to Abahlali is to focus more on changing minds, because there are many people who still don't understand how the system undermines them and how the system ignores, and opposes their interests.

Thanks

Simthembile Zikode

27 JANUARY 2021

Presentation · S'bu Zikode

The Politic of Home

Thousand Currents, 'In Defence of Home', 27 January 2021

May I first of all thank Thousand Currents and all organisers of this session, and acknowledge my fellow panellists here.

Dignity is at the centre of the politic of our movement. We insist that the recognition of the full and equal dignity of every human being is non-negotiable. We work to build a movement in which the dignity of the oppressed is respected and communities in which the dignity of the oppressed is respected. We also struggle to force the rest of the society to respect the dignity of oppressed people. People often describe our movement as a home, a place where they belong and feel respected.

Dignity has many different aspects. The right of every human being to have a safe and decent home is an important part of what we mean when we say that we are struggling for our dignity as human beings to be recognised. In fact, our main slogan is 'Land, housing & dignity'.

The issue of the home is an urgent and painful one for us. Many of our ancestors were forced off their land by colonial terror. The apartheid system continually destroyed black people's homes in the cities with the aim of forcing black people to townships outside the cities or to rural 'homelands'. People resisted these attacks bravely, with women often leading, but the state was able to use violent force to evict millions of people from their homes. Many of us grew up with mothers who were living in other people's homes while they worked as domestic workers. Many of us had fathers who were away from their family homes working in the mines.

In 1955 the ANC adopted the Freedom Charter after collecting demands from people across the country. It was a vision for life in a liberated South Africa. The Freedom Charter promised that after apartheid:

All people shall have the right to live where they choose, to be decently housed, and to bring up their families in comfort and security;

Unused housing space to be made available to the people;

Rent and prices shall be lowered, food plentiful and no one shall go hungry;

In the 1970s and 1980s people began to occupy land in the cities or near the cities. Huge struggles had to be fought to occupy and keep this land. Again, women were often in the forefront.

After apartheid the ANC promised that there would be decent housing for all. But the houses that they built were much, much smaller than the houses built under apartheid, were very badly built and were usually much further out of the cities than the apartheid townships.

Shack settlements, which had started as land occupations, were attacked by the state. Some people were left homeless and others were forced to what people called 'human dumping grounds' far out of the cities to live in houses that people called 'dog kennels. Many people were evicted or forcibly removed at gunpoint.

Our rulers changed, but the way that the government treated poor black people did not change. We continued to face violence, the destruction of our homes and forced removal. This was a shock to us. It was not something that we expected. Now we know very well that oppressors come in all colours and speak all languages.

Today there are millions more people living in shacks than under apartheid. People continue to live in squalor with no refuse removal or drains, no roads and paths, no toilets or electricity and not enough water for everyone. There are regular fires and floods. These are not conditions that are fit for human beings. In fact, people often say that they are treated like animals and not human beings.

The government is now building some houses where people have chosen to live which is much better than forcing them, often at gunpoint, out to the human dumping grounds. But the system is completely corrupted. Housing budgets are used to make politically connected people very rich and local councillors only allocate houses to their supporters and to people that can pay bribes. Others are left homeless when development comes. Development is often experienced as violent dispossession.

People who have organised to improve the conditions in shack settlements have been beaten, tortured, arrested, jailed and murdered. When new land occupations are organised it is not unusual for them to be violently attacked by the state twenty or thirty times. These attacks are illegal and live ammunition is often used. Our humanity is continually vandalised.

It is taken as a crime for us to organise ourselves, think for ourselves and speak for ourselves. It is not just the state that treats the self-organisation of the oppressed as criminal. Some NGOs and academics have done the same.

The evictions that we face are not aimed at gentrifying our communities. They are aimed at destroying our communities. Sometimes a land occupation will be replaced with something like a shopping mall and everyone can see that capitalism is driving this violence against us. But sometimes the ANC will destroy our occupation with the aim of bringing in their own people so that local councillors can charge rent and make sure that they have control over their wards. Sometimes land will be left empty after an eviction. Some evictions do not happen because there are other plans for the land but because the ANC and the state want to crush our autonomy and any challenges to its authority.

We are still struggling for the right to have safe and decent homes. Before you can have a home you must have land. This is why our struggle is a struggle for land, for land in the cities, before it is a struggle for houses. In fact, most of our members would rather build their own houses than have the government build them because they do not trust the government.

We identify and occupy well located unused land. This is urban planning from below and it is land reform from below. No one is allowed to charge rent in a land occupation and any land occupation affiliated to our movement must be run on a democratic basis. We have built halls, creches, roads, paths, youth centres, political schools and more on our land occupations. We have installed our own water and electricity connections. We are now also seriously working to build collectively organised and run urban farms. We are establishing what some people call communes or self-managed communities.

Women are often in the forefront of this struggle, and many of our leaders are women. Without the courage of women, and their commitment to build and defend homes, our movement would not exist and our families are broken. This is why building women's power in struggle is one of our most important commitments.

We are winning land. There have been many successful occupations. Thousands of people live on these occupations. But the price for that land has often been paid in blood. It is clear that we are not counted as human beings by the ruling party, the state or other elites in society. Our demand for a home of dignity is taken as criminal.

An important part of building a large movement and keeping it growing through repression is to make sure that the members control the movement and that the leaders are mandated by the members. In a meeting everyone must be encouraged to speak and the role of the leader must be to ensure that everyone's voice is heard, and that there is a careful collective process to reach decisions.

That process must respect everyone's dignity. The leader's role is to ensure a democratic and respectful process and not to decide for others.

A movement that gives up its autonomy to a political party or an NGO will quickly collapse. The members of a movement must know that it is their movement.

It is also important that in a movement people care for each other. A movement is not just a political tool. It also needs to be a family and a community.

Something else that is very important is to always encourage and train new leaders. The more good leaders that a movement has the stronger it is.

We call all of this 'a living politic', which is a politic that is organised and owned by the oppressed and which speaks directly from and to their conditions and their lives.

We have been struggling for more than 15 years. We have survived hundreds of evictions and repeated violence from the state and the ANC. We have lost 18 comrades to murder by the police, the anti-land invasion unit or the izinkabi (assassins hired by local politicians).

But the ANC is not our only enemy. We were made poor by the system of racial capitalism. Poverty will not be abolished until racism and capitalism are abolished. No organisation can do this on its own, and no country can do this on its own which is why we work to build respectful solidarity with other progressive organisations in South Africa and across the world.

We will not win a secure right to land, and thereby to housing, and thereby to homes, without building the power of the oppressed from below. No small organisation can substitute itself for the organised power of the oppressed.

We will not be able to win the right to participate in all decision making that affects us without building our power from below. We are committed to radical democracy, democracy where people live, work and study, and not just to elections every few years.

We organise with dignity and for dignity. We struggle from the homes that we have built on occupied land for a society in which everyone has a safe and decent home.

I thank you.

17 FEBRUARY 2021

Talk · S'bu Zikode

The Power of Abahlali and our Living Politic has been Built with Our Blood

American University, 'Thinking Freedom from the Global South', February 2021

May I first of all take this opportunity to thank the American University's Anti-Racist Research & Policy Center, Department of Critical Race, Gender and Culture Studies and Women's Initiative for giving Abahlali this important opportunity to speak here today. The most powerful forces of oppression operate at a global level, and for this reason the movements that organise resistance need to connect with each other. Our movement is open to the world, we insist that the world must be shared and we work to build solidarity with progressive forces everywhere.

Students have often played an important role in struggle, and when university trained intellectuals are able to humble themselves and work with oppressed people in a spirit of equality and mutual respect they can play an important role in struggle too.

Thanks to Professor Irene Callis for your leadership and guidance, and for making this discussion possible.

I also appreciate this opportunity and am honoured because I am sharing it with Abahlali scholar and comrade, Professor Nigel Gibson who has introduced me today. For those of you who may not know Professor Gibson, he is not just a Fanon scholar, but was also graduated from the University of Abahlali base-Mjondolo with his book "Fanonian Practices in South Africa, from Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo".

Many academics start their work by assuming that poor black people cannot think for ourselves and that it is their job to think for us, speak for us and decide for us. Nigel always met us as equals. He understands that we can learn from him and that he can learn from us. This is why he is a comrade professor.

I also wish to thank Abahlali, the organisation that has entrusted me with this responsibility as well. In our movement all requests to speak at events like

this are referred back to a democratic process before being accepted. No member of the movement represents themselves. We speak with the responsibility of carrying a mandate from the movement.

This virtual speaker series “Thinking Freedom from the Global South” is indeed pushing anti-colonial thought and practice. There are oppressed people everywhere, including the United States. There are also oppressors everywhere, including in countries like South Africa. It is our own elites that murder us when we organise with the simple demand of being recognised as human beings. It is the same in India, Brazil, Zimbabwe and many other countries.

But as we all know since the time of colonialism the countries of the global South have been dominated by the North. There can be no future for humanity unless this is changed and a world of equality between countries and between people is built.

Abahlali baseMjondolo is a radical, mass democratic movement of shack dwellers and other poor people in South Africa. The movement is led by shack dwellers themselves who have often been looked down upon. I remember when we first started, many people did not believe that the poor could think for themselves. They often referred to our movement as *umlilo wamaphepha* – a fire of papers that will not last. Many of these people even from government were also critical and ashamed of the name of our movement Abahlali baseMjondolo (residents of the shacks). They told us that it was ugly and they even persuaded us to change it into some fancy English name that suggests all African people in South Africa are liberated and enjoy their freedom, while in reality millions of us are landless, homeless, living in deep poverty and excluded from official forms of decision making.

It was colonialism that made us landless, that commodified land and built segregated cities. It was colonialism that came with the idea that some people cannot think, that they do not count as human beings and that they can be repressed and subject to violence with impunity when they try to take their places as human beings. More than 25 years after the end of apartheid we remain landless, land remains commodified and cities continue to be segregated, but now on the basis of class. Our humanity continues to be denied, elites continue to think that we cannot think for ourselves and that they should think and speak for us, and when we insist on our humanity we continue to be subject to violence, even to murder.

For all these reasons our struggle is an anti-colonial struggle. The idea that our languages and culture are primitive and should be replaced with what are seen as 'modern' languages and practice be rejected at all cost.

Our movement is open to the world. We learn from comrades everywhere. We are currently pursuing a programme of urban farming on occupied land. The seeds that we used to start this project came from the MST, the landless movement in Brazil. We see this as a beautiful thing. But we also use our own culture and history to build our movement.

I will give one example. In rural villages there are often meetings in which each man is allowed to make his point. That point is not always criticised rather a different view will be raised by someone else. The man who raised the withdrawn point may not be offended by that. This means that no one feels that their dignity has been compromised. Everyone is encouraged to speak and to participate. Through a slow discussion a consensus will emerge about which ideas are best. Often what will emerge will be a mixture of different ideas, or one idea will lead to another one so that in the end the meeting comes to a consensus that has been worked out together. Whoever chairs the meeting facilitates this discussion and is bound to sum up what has been discussed and resolved. The role of the chairperson is not to decide for the people, but to support the process in which people think and decide together.

In the village women may be sitting quietly and not say a word. But women often have the power to influence or send their opinion through their partners or male neighbours outside formal proceedings. This is to say that some men would have received briefing from women prior to getting into the meetings. If a man did not raise the particular point he was briefed to raise, he is likely to receive criticism from that woman. So, women do have some power to strategical influence the meetings behind the scenes.

We use the same method in our movement with one major difference. A majority of our members are women, the majority of participants in meetings are women and meetings are often run by women. In fact, where they are male leaders they are chosen by women and they know that they are accountable to women.

This example shows how our movement draws on our culture and history, sometimes advancing it quite radically, to build a movement, a movement that has survived for 15 years despite very serious repression. There are many other

examples such as ways to welcome strangers and to resolve serious conflicts peacefully.

One of the colonial ideas that we have to resist from many quarters is the view that poor African people cannot think for themselves. We find this thinking in the ruling party and the state. It is very strong in the universities and in most NGOs.

There are a number of academics who call themselves socialists and are trusted by the left internationally to represent South Africa who are deeply blinded by the idea that poor African cannot think for themselves. In fact, they have called the idea that we can think for ourselves 'romantic' or even 'Negrophilia'.

Some are so confident that they should be leading the struggle of the oppressed that they have sought to destroy our movement because we have insisted that we will take direction from our members and not from them. They have slandered us, published fraud in their journals, supported state propaganda against us, worked with a front organisation for the intelligence services to attack us and, just like the state, used their money to bribe other oppressed people to attack us. They have often thought that they have a right to decide who should represent our movement and struggle internationally. They have contempt for our democratic structures and our own decision making.

Abahlali was formed in Durban in 2005. The movement was formed to fight for, protect, promote and advance the interest and dignity of the shack dwellers and the poor in South Africa, and to create a space for us to build our own democracy and power.

It was formed after promises for development and engagement were made and after promises were broken. It was formed because the lies were put before the truth. In the years before the movement was formed many people, especially young men, had the experience of serious police harassment and violence during their everyday lives. They were often insulted and assaulted. For a number of the people that formed our movement it was this experience that led them to start to be critical of the new democracy. Later there were threats of forced removals to the human dumping grounds for outside of the city.

The final betrayal that led to the formation of the movement was when a piece of land that had long been promised to the residents of the Kennedy Road shack settlement for housing was sold to a local business man. We were told

that the ANC was leading a revolution but profit was put before human needs. The commercial value of land was put before its social value. The living conditions in shack settlements were and still are life-threatening, as noted by the United Nations. There is hardly any water and sanitation, no road access, no refuse collections and no electricity. People are burnt to death in shack fires as they are forced to use candles to light and paraffin stoves to cook. These living conditions put us at all kinds of diseases especially tuberculosis and HIV. Our children continue to die from diarrhoea. Today we face a high risk from the Covid-10 pandemic.

Politicians thought they were owning us. Even today when they speak about us, they refer to black impoverished people as “our people”. They decide for us and go out to speak for us without us. They steal public funds at a huge scale. They have no sense of ubuntu (humanism) and do not appreciate the deep responsibility of being trusted to the positions of power.

This is why when we started our movement we insisted so strongly that we would think and decide for ourselves, and that we would build our own autonomous and democratic power. This is why we created our own philosophy and our politic. Later we discovered that most NGOs also thought that they should own us, decide for us and speak for us.

Both the government and these NGOs tried to show us to the world as criminals when we insisted on our autonomy. It became clear that for elites in and out of the state it was criminal for us to ask to be recognised as human beings, and to insist on our human dignity.

After 25 years of democracy shack dwellers still live in the mud like pigs, without access to basic services such as water, electricity and toilets. After 25 years what was supposed to become a rainbow nation witnesses regular xenophobia and violence against migrants and minority ethnic groups. After 25 years of democracy there are more people living in shacks than before, the poor are poorer than before and police violence is just as bad as it always was.

Our constitutional democracy is being undermined by some of those who claimed to have fought for this democracy. Like in Zimbabwe they wish to make democracy a ticket to reward only those who claimed to have been in the liberation army. The same people who claim to have been in an army of liberation are now attacking migrants in the streets.

Our cities have been taken over by political mafias and gangster politicians in suits and ties. They have been prepared to kill in order to ascend to the positions of power. Some of them have blood on their hands. A number of our leaders have been assassinated. Two ANC leaders are now in jail for killing our leaders.

The price for land, for decent housing and the right to the city, is paid in blood. Brutal and unlawful evictions continue to terrorize our communities. The organized izinkabi (hitmen), the Land Invasion Unit of the eThekweni Municipality (Durban), the Red Ants of the City of Johannesburg and the Anti-Land Invasion unit of the municipality in Cape Town have subverted the law and use violence on landless people. This is what happens when the commercial value of land is placed before its social value. This is what happens when an accountable political leadership is replaced by gangster politicians. This is what happens when a democratic state is replaced by a police state.

So, what we have discovered was that the democracy achieved in 1994 was never for the impoverished people. The elites used the poor and the working class to win power, but they used us as ladders to climb up and replace the old white oppressors. Democracy became an opportunity for the politicians and elites to enrich themselves at the expense of millions of people of South Africa. The question of land, the question of the right to the cities and the question of building a participatory democracy were never resolved.

We were never allowed to participate in decision-making with regards to our lives and our communities. When we organize to insist on our right to participate in this democracy we were presented as “the third force” which means agents of foreign powers working with old apartheid forces. We were slandered and violently repressed by the state and the ruling party. Local politicians eventually became dangerous figures in our communities. Today people say *sesiyawasaba amakhansela* (we are afraid of councillors).

The ANC has betrayed the struggle for liberation and become new oppressors. For many years it was very difficult to get progressive people in other countries to understand this. Now, after the Marikana massacre in 2012, and the huge theft when Jacob Zuma was president, everyone understands this very well.

However, one thing to appreciate is that Abahlali communities have organised and built our own democracy from below. A democracy that recognises every human being. A democracy that respect every human life. A democracy

that encourages participation in decision making. A democracy that celebrates women's power and is committed to self-management.

This is what we call a living politic. It is the politic of truth and it is the politic of principle and courage. It is the politic that is thought from the ground about the reality of our lives. This politic is still not found in big philosophical books of our time. It is found and thought from the humility of ordinary men and women of our time. It is the politic of land. Some refer to it as "life and death" as we come from mother earth and shall be buried in the earth when we die.

It is a politic that everyone can understand. It is the politic of decent housing for all. It is the politic of good schools, hospitals that heal, libraries, parks, safe streets and a decent income for all. It is the politic of water. Many of us live without sufficient water in shacks and in rural villages. If we are lucky to have one tap we share it in our hundreds, yet a middle class or rich person could have up to seven taps in one house in one family. We know water is a natural resource, a gift from God. But now the politicians, who want to make themselves as if they were gods, decide who should get it and at what cost. Electricity is also commodified. Mnikelo Ndabankulu, one of the founders of our movement, used to say that we do not need electricity but our lives need electricity.

During these fifteen years of our struggle the self-organisation of impoverished communities has been seen as some form of conspiracy. Sometimes we are accused of being funded by foreign agencies that aim to destabilize our hard-won democracy. This is done to justify violence on us. Organising outside the ruling party and the state and outside of the NGOs has cost us lives. Insisting that land, cities, wealth must be shared has cost us lives. We lost 18 activists between 2013 and 2018. This is why our members started to say that they are in a situation in which they have to accept that their commitment is to land or death. Many of us have scars just for insisting that impoverished people must count in our society.

Although we have deep scars and remain marginalised, today we have a place called home because of our own courage and inkani – which is a kind of strong determination. We have done this through occupying vacant and unused land. We have connected ourselves to water and electricity. We have built cooperatives and community gardens. We have built crèches for our children and access roads to our settlements. This is called democratic urban planning from

below. What choices do you have when your own government has no time for its people? What choices do you have when your local councillor has become a dangerous figure to the same people that have elected him or her into power? What choices do you have when your local councillor spends their time chasing tenders and business deals?

Today we remain a people's movement and the largest to have emerged in post-apartheid South Africa. It is the democracy that we have built ourselves that has given hope to many people in South Africa and abroad. The power of Abahlali and our living politic has carried the values and the treasure of our democracy and we work hard to build the future we want, while we defend our gains. It is important to repeat that the power of Abahlali and living politic has been paid in blood.

Ubuhlali, the philosophy of our movement, is our joy and our pride that can be used to advance democracy, to defend the constitutional democracy that was won in 1994 against a criminal elite in the ruling party and the state, to deepen and expand that democracy. After fifteen years of our struggle we remain committed to building radical democracy from below. We remain committed to the principle that the world and its wealth, cities and land must be shared. We remain committed to our right to participate in discussions and to make decisions in a way that is shared.

This is the mission that confronts our generation.

Let us work together in our communities, and across the world, to humanise the world.

I thank you.

8 MARCH 2021

Lecture · Nomsa Sizani

Thuli Ndlovu Lecture for International Women's Day

Thuli Ndlovu Lecture for International Women's Day, 2021

Thank you to Pan-Africanism Today for the invitation to speak today. We appreciate all organisations that work to build living solidarity between progressive forces. We also appreciate the opportunity to be part of this discussion on International Women's Day, which is a day that comes out of women's struggles and is used to celebrate women in struggle around the world.

Women's determination and courage are the foundation of our movement, and we are committed to building women's power in struggle. Thuli Ndlovu was one of the bravest women in our movement. She was born in February 1978, in a semi-rural area called KwaNdengezi.

Thuli joined Abahlali baseMjondolo in 2012. She was elected as a branch chairperson in her community, and later she was also elected as a National Council Member of the movement. Thuli was an honest, bold, genuine and fearless person. She was a straight forward person. Should understood the necessity and power of inkani. She was committed to ipolitiki ephilayo, to living politics, and to ubuhlali.

She fought for the dignity of the oppressed, and for our right to participate in all decision making that affects us. She fought the struggle for participatory development. She stood up to a gangster councillor and his committee and bodyguards. She stood up to men who were always armed and who were very dangerous.

She was assassinated in her home in KwaNdengezi on 29 September 2014. A man burst into her home and shot her seven times while she was carrying her one-year old son Freedom in her arms. Her son survived but she died on the scene. Sphe Madlala, an 18-year-old neighbour was also in the house. He had come to the house to help Thuli's 17-year-old daughter, Sli, with her matric studies in maths and science. Sphe was also shot twice in the stomach but he survived. Sli was in a separate room and was unharmed.

An hour before the incident Mduduzi Ngcobo, the local councillor who is known as Nqola, was moving around near Thuli's home in his car. When she saw Nqola near her house Thuli told her mother that "today we are going to be shot". She also called one of her comrades in the movement to express her concerns.

Thuli had often been intimidated and threatened by Nqola. The local police always sided with Nqola. This is typical. The police often take orders from councillors instead of following the rule of law. This is one reason why our movement stands for community control of the police.

KwaNdengezi is like a rural area and people live in their own houses and not in shacks. They have an iNkosi and iziNduna. Land is allocated by the iziNduna and is not paid for. The problems in KwaNdengezi started in 2010 when Nqola called a meeting to announce that a housing project would be taking place in the area. Before accepting the project, the community raised concerns about their families' grave yards. They said that a housing project should not frustrate people but improve people's lives. It was agreed that before the project starts another community meeting will be called to discuss how it should be structured. It was also agreed that as this is a community project therefore it should be driven by the community.

However, no further meeting was called and the project was imposed on people from above. Many attempts were made to meet with the Councillor but when meetings were scheduled he did not attend them. When this housing project started RDP houses were just built anywhere and without any discussion or consultation. Some people found that two or three houses were suddenly being built in their yards. Fences were just destroyed and houses were built on their gardens and even next to or over their family graves. There was no respect for the dead.

When people complained about these houses being built in their yards and on their gardens and graves they were told that their houses were shacks and that therefore they have no ownership or say – no rights at all. However, their houses are not shacks. They were built on properly allocated land and are solid structures having as many as five rooms in some cases.

Nqola was also having a corrupt relationship with the housing contractors. He suddenly became very rich, and was driving a black Navara SUV car.

In October 2012, the community of KwaNdengezi held a protest blockading the main road going straight to Kwandengezi Police station. The road blockade was organised after they were ignored by the ANC Ward Councillor while demanding answers to their list of grievances. Thuli Ndlovu was the one who was leading that protest. She was deliberately singled out for personal intimidation and assault. Police who were carrying big guns accompanied Nqola to the protest and assaulted protesters. That night Nqola went to Thuli's house shouting threats and shooting a gun outside her house.

Thuli was very brave you would hear her saying the chant "Qina Mhlali qina!" meaning be strong Mhlali be strong. This is the chant we say in Abahlali when situations are tough. We say this chant when we are facing the brutality from the police, the brutality from the state, and also when we are facing brutal evictions from private security companies.

Then one night they killed our brave Thuli. Her "crime" was to speak the truth and only the truth. The only problem is that when you speak the truth you become a threat to the gangster politicians who always want to enrich themselves out of the poor. They will always make sure they find a way to remove you when they think that you are disturbing them. Thuli died because of exposing corruption.

On 20 May 2016 ANC Velile Lesheku and Mduduzi Ngcobo – both ANC councillors – and their hitman Mlungisi Ndlovu were all sentenced to life imprisonment.

The movement made sure that Thuli was buried with all the honour of a hero of the oppressed. We made sure that she was laid to rest in a grave that acknowledged her dignity. Along with other fallen comrades she is remembered in our songs. The community hall at the eKhenana land occupation, which is also a commune, is named after her. The eKhenana comrades have also developed a play which tells Thuli's story. Each year our movement hosts a lecture in her honour. We are also proud that we have managed to support Sli to get a higher education. Now she is a graduate, with a degree in teaching

Thuli's spirit will live within us as women of Abahlali forever. We will carry on where Thuli Ndlovu left. The struggle for land and dignity continues!!! The struggle against gangster politicians and capitalism continues. The struggle to build women's power from below continues. The struggle for participatory development continues. The struggle for the dignity of all people to be recognised continues. The struggle for land, wealth, cities and power to be fairly shared

continues. The struggle for radical democracy and a living communism built from below continues.

Abahlali women have never stopped despite this assassination, despite losing husbands, brothers and sons, despite being tortured in police stations and despite facing too many violent evictions for us to be able to keep count. We have continued where Thuli Ndlovu's life stopped. We are still fighting against all forms of violence against women and other kinds of abuse of women. We are still fighting patriarchy, and all the oppressions forced on women. Abahlali women are still occupying land, building communities and resisting evictions even though the price for land continues to be paid in blood. We will not stop organising and resisting because there is no true revolution without the full liberation of all women.

I am speaking about the Thulis of today. I am speaking about the 29 brave women of the Azania land occupation who were arrested for resisting evictions during the first lockdown. Their 'crime' was to sleep outside while their homes were destroyed. I am speaking about Phumelele Mkhize the young and very, very brave woman of the eKhenana occupation who was brutally beaten by armed men hired by the state when she was resisting evictions. I am speaking about Melita Ngcobo who was arrested in Gauteng after her ANC ward councillor accused her of being an 'anti-developmental'. This was after she fought the reblocking that was imposed on the people of Tembisa.

Though Thuli died a horrible death the women of Abahlali are still standing strong. We have many women branch chairpersons and many women on the national council. These women continue to insist that their dignity is non-negotiable and to organise and struggle. They continue to stand up the councillors, the police and the security companies that are paid to attack us and destroy our homes.

We stand with all women who are organising and struggling to humanise the world where ever they are. We stand in solidarity with all women facing repression. We send our love and solidarity to the families, neighbours, friends and comrades of all the women around the world who have been murdered for insisting on their humanity.

We are all Thuli Ndlovu.

THULI NDLOVU SHALL FOREVER BE OUR HERO
LONG LIVE THE SPIRIT OF THULI LONG LIVE
AMANDLAAAAA!!!!!!!

21 APRIL 2021

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Per Anger Prize Speech

Per Anger Prize, 21 April 2021

The price for land, for decent housing and the right to the city is paid in blood. Brutal and unlawful evictions continue to terrorize our communities.

No human being should live in substandard housing conditions, without access to basic services such as water and sanitation, where there is no road access, where there is no electricity and where there is no refuse collection.

I have dedicated my life to the fight for equal rights for all South Africans. And I am deeply honoured and humbled to stand here today, and receive the Per Anger Prize – a prize named after a man who bravely resisted fascism, and saved many lives.

I want to extend my deep gratitude to the jury, the Living History Forum, Minister Amanda Lind and Afrikagrupperna for nominating me.

We all know that many of the people of Sweden, as well as their government, gave strong support to our people during apartheid. So, it is an honour to receive a prize like this from the Swedish government.

I have been carried through the last fifteen years by the movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, a movement of the poor, of people living in shacks. We have more than 80 000 members, the majority are women. Membership and leadership are open to all without regard to ethnicity or national origin.

We insist that the dignity of all human beings must be recognised. We should be included in all decision making that affects us, our right to the city should be recognised, our settlements should receive adequate services and we should be able to build our homes and communities in peace.

We wish to see a much deeper form of democracy in our country, and in the world.

We resist the idea that because we are poor, we must be confined to the dark corners.

We have organised in solidarity with struggles all over the world, and built relationships with movements in different countries. The struggle is global.

The award of the Per Anger Prize means that our struggle for land, decent housing and dignity has been recognised as just and legitimate in Sweden. It is an acknowledgement that the poor have experiences and ideas from which others can learn. They can learn from the courage of the Abahlali members who have continued to organise despite repeated violent evictions, serious intimidation, and assassinations.

An award for me is also an award for the movement, and for the determination and courage of all the people who have kept our movement going for fifteen years, despite very serious repression which has included arrests, death threats and murders.

Per Anger was a brave man. Our comrades who have lost their lives – people like Thuli Ndlovu, Nkululeko Gwala and others – were brave people. Today courage meets courage. Principle meets principle.

No legitimate and democratic movement, or activist, should be criminalized and attacked when organising to build the power of the oppressed from below. All evictions leading to homelessness must be stopped and those responsible for illegal and violent evictions must face criminal charges.

The poor are not poor by choice. It is the history of colonialism, apartheid and land dispossession that keep us in deep poverty. The commodification of land and state corruption keep us poor. This is why the social value of land must come before its commercial value. This is why it is important to organise, to build democratic power from below. This requires building solidarity between and within struggling communities. This is what has kept us strong.

It is very dangerous to be an activist in South Africa, and in many countries around the world, because we are well organized and can stand firm to protect our rights. This is perceived as threatening to people in power.

There is a serious problem of political gangsterism in South Africa, and especially in the city of Durban and the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Hundreds of people have been assassinated.

Corrupted politicians who enrich themselves and their families at the expense of millions of poor people of South Africa have often objected our work. They have used the police, militarized private security guards and izinkabi (hit-men) to kill us.

Abahlali have faced serious repression. We have been beaten, tortured in police custody, slandered in the media and subject to open death threats. Some of us have been murdered with impunity.

I am among those who have suffered serious repression – including arrest, torture, the destruction of my home, slander, and death threats.

In a period of ten years our movement lost eighteen activists. The price for land and dignity has been paid in blood. These murders have not been investigated. Our lives count for nothing to the state and to much of society. We are treated as if we are beneath the law. This award says that our lives count to you. This kind of support forces the repressive forces that we confront to recognise that we are not people that do not count. It helps to keep us safe.

Today I call on the people of South Africa, mostly young people as they are the future of our country and the world, to support our struggle for land, decent housing and dignity. I also call on the government of South Africa to stop evicting poor people and to stop the use of violence when dealing with poor people. I call on the government to consider putting the social value of land before its commercial value. I also call on the government of South Africa to protect and uphold our hard-won constitutional democracy.

You have my deep gratitude, and the deep gratitude of Abahlali baseMjondolo. I hope that we can work together to continue the struggle to humanize the world.

Together, we stand for dignity, respect and democracy.

We are all people that count.

Thank you!

16 SEPTEMBER 2021

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Food sovereignty from the perspective of the urban poor

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung dialogue with the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, September 2021

May I express my appreciation to the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and all organisers of this important discussion. I greet the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Mr Michael Fakhri, and all fellow speakers and participants.

Current statistics show that almost two million people in South Africa suffer 'perpetual hunger', many more suffer periods without food. Around the world vast numbers of people go hungry.

It is morally wrong and unjust for people to starve in the most productive economy in human history. There are more than enough resources to feed, house and educate every human being. There are enough resources to abolish poverty. But these resources are not used to meet people's needs, instead they are used to control poor countries, communities and families.

In South Africa what shack dwellers continue to be told is that the hunger and the substandard living conditions in which we struggle to survive, or that force migrants to move, are a result of our own poor choices in life. In reality the problem is that there are no jobs for most of the poor and those few who are employed are exploited and under-paid. Those of us who are self-employed in the streets of our cities to earn an honest living are attacked and have our food confiscated by the metro police. Those of us who occupy vacant and unused urban lands to build homes close to opportunities for livelihoods are evicted and even killed with impunity. It is a very serious problem that when land occupations are criminalised the right to the city is limited to those who have money.

Millions of families in South Africa rely on state grants but they are not enough for a viable and dignified life. Many families go to bed without a meal. We know that keeping the communities hungry and poor is enjoyed by some politicians who use this tragedy as a controlling mechanism.

We also know that when people receive their grants they mostly go straight to the supermarkets to buy food. The supermarkets suck money out of poor communities and make the rich even richer. It was recently reported that the largest shareholder in Shoprite will receive a payment of R342 million. This is completely immoral, especially in a country with mass unemployment, mass impoverishment and mass starvation.

Almost 50% of South Africa's population is unemployed with over 70% of youth being unemployed. Hunger and starvation are an order of day. In July this year South Africa saw the biggest food riot that we have ever seen in the history of this country, and one of the biggest in the world. The food riots were used as cover by corrupt politicians but the fact is that most of the people who participated in the riots were not supporters of Jacob Zuma and were looking for food. More than 350 people were killed during the riots. After the riots the police and the army went door to door in poor communities seizing food at gunpoint. They killed at least one person, Zamekile Shangase, a person who had held an elected position of leadership in one of our branches.

The food riots sent a clear message to the government and corporates that as long as people live in poverty there can never be peace and stability. Today the UN and corporations should draw an important lesson on the recent development in South Africa. Without justice there will be no peace.

The Covid-19 pandemic made this situation even worse with national lockdowns restrictions. During the hard lockdown people who were already poor and living precarious lives were forced to stay at home with no income. This created anxiety and frustration in some families. Gender-based violence and other social ills such as rape increased during national lockdown. It was very difficult for people to adhere to important health measures. How do you keep social distance when you are forced to live in a highly congested environment? How do you constantly wash your hands when you live in a shack settlement that has been left without water?

As a result of abandonment by the state Abahlali have had to occupy vacant and unused land to build homes for our families, to start cooperatives for community gardens, to run mini cooperative shops, share childcare and create political schools, and places for poetry, music and dance.

It has been through these kinds of experiences that we have demonstrated that self-organised and democratically managed forms of food sovereignty can

eradicate hunger, and even poverty, if the state will allow it. It would be even better if the state will support it.

We have achieved land reform from below, built community halls and creches for our children without the support of the state. However, we have had to organise and resist to remain on these pieces of land that are often not large enough to also produce food for our families. Lives of sons and daughters of our movement have been taken, women and men have been killed. The recent killing of Zamekile by the police in Lamontville in Durban is another painful experience of poor people being killed with impunity. Her children are orphans today with nobody to raise them with a mother's love.

We have done incredible things on our own against severe repression from the state. However, our lives would be much better if the state gave us the space to organise ourselves freely or even supported us to organise and build our collective power. To deal with the question of hunger we need urban land, support to farm that land in the form of seeds, irrigation, tools, organic fertiliser and so on. We also need a system of markets where poor people can sell food to each other and keep their money moving among the poor.

We face two forces that oppress us. One is the corrupt politicians that always want to control us to make money from our poverty. But we are also oppressed by corporate power manifesting itself in different forms during brutal evictions of communities and no accountability. Some state organs are being used by corporates who then hide behind the police to displace communities from the land. The way that corrupt politicians and corporates have captured the state has created poverty and misery. This has been well articulated in evidence presented at the State Capture Commission known as the Zondo Commission in South Africa.

We can only overcome food crises when the social value of land is put before its commercial value. Land must be decommmodified and the poor supported to build cooperative urban gardens and farms, and to sell to each other through a system of local markets. The food system needs to be taken back from the supermarkets. This will also have the benefit of making healthy forms of food available to the majority. As an immediate measure in the crisis the huge profits being made by the supermarkets can be very heavily taxed to help to pay for all this. But the supermarkets that remain after building a system of grassroots

food sovereignty need to be handed over to their workers and managed democratically, buying most of their food from small scale community gardening and farming projects.

It is important to understand that there cannot be a capitalist solution to the crisis of hunger and that there cannot be a solution to the crisis without building the democratic power of the oppressed from below.

Our movement makes the following demands:

There must be a rapid release of land for housing and community farming and an end to evictions.

Urban farming cooperatives must be supported with seeds, fertiliser, tools and land.

A system of local markets must be established and supported so that poor people can sell to each other.

The informal economy needs to be supported and the confiscation of goods for making an honest living must no longer be criminalised.

There needs to be serious and massive programme of job creation.

Government must provide a viable basic income grant for the unemployed until they find a decent job and exit the system.

There must be provision of a reasonable Covid-19 relief grant for people in distress during this time.

The governance of our cities must be democratised and people supported to build democratic forms of popular power from below.

4 DECEMBER 2021

Interview · Thapelo Mohapi

‘We will resist’

Interview by Pavan Kulkarni, Peoples Dispatch, 4 December 2021. An edited excerpt.

Peoples Dispatch: For the members of AbM, what significance does this congress hold?

Thapelo Mohapi: This congress shows democracy from below; the people who give us the mandate have elected the new national council. We do this every three years because there is no dictatorship (in our organization); there is democracy, there is socialism. The voices of the people are more important than of individual leaders. The masses have the power to elect the leadership every three years, and it's the masses whose mandate the leadership will carry for the next three years.

PD: By renewing the democratic mandate at a time when the movement is facing a relentless crackdown, what message do you seek to send out to the state and to the other forces that position themselves against the movement?

TM: We are first and foremost showing our respect for and our faith in the power of democracy from below. In the midst of the attacks by the state, by its police, and by the goons of the ruling ANC, we continue to show the strength of our democratic process. This democratic process is very different from the process that has imposed this government on South Africa.” Only 40 or 50% of the people who are registered to vote in the election did vote, and most of the people who are eligible to vote did not even register.

We, on the other hand, are showing the way of democratic practice. Voices of the more than hundred thousand members of Abahlali counted in the congress. But because we could not all gather in one place together, there were 400 delegates who were chosen by the constituencies of the branches and sent to the congress with a mandate to vote (according to their will).

PD: The eKhenana land occupation has been at the center of recent attacks on AbM. What were some of the conclusions drawn by the Congress with regards to the struggle in eKhenana?

TM: The policy conference that was held before the congress made it very clear that Abahlali is prepared to defend any occupation that represents a communal way for people to sustain themselves. We are going to protect our movement from attacks, from those who want to destroy the hope eKhenana occupation has offered.

We will go to court if necessary, or do whatever it takes to protect any progressive occupation. When people are finding a way to sustain themselves in these difficult times through communal projects, the ANC government wants to destroy these projects and force people to depend on the government for survival. But we will resist. We will mobilize the masses from below and use all necessary means to defend ourselves.

PD: What were some of the other resolutions that came out of the policy conference?

TM: One of the resolutions is that we will strengthen our mandate to build a just and equal society where people are treated with dignity regardless of the color of their skin, their nationality or their socio-economic status. To accomplish this, we will grow our movement, increase our membership among the masses from the current hundred thousand to half a million, and expand our branches. We will work to promote and organize a communal way of life so people will become self-sufficient. We will continue to work on the practice of food sovereignty because the state has failed us; we need to build a bottom-up alternative to sustain ourselves.

We have also resolved that when there is an election, nationally or at local levels, we should not vote as individuals in different directions. We need to vote collectively in one direction to consolidate our power. We are going to work with progressive working class political parties and make sure that the more than hundred thousand votes we have currently – and this number of course will grow further – will all be cast for one political party.

PD: Had AbM not taken a position in support of any political party before this congress?

TM: In the previous general election, Abahlali supported the SRWP (Socialist Revolutionary Workers' Party), but the members were told they could vote for their choice as individuals. And they voted differently. This weakens our power. This time around we have decided that we will collectively determine at the general assembly which working class party we have to support, and then

ensure we all vote unanimously to consolidate our votes and use it to strengthen that party, so it can carry the mandate of the poor and the marginalized.

We have also given a call to ensure that our members do not vote for the ruling ANC. We are clear that our people should not vote for their graves, because the ANC has been killing the activists of Abahlali. Under ANC's 27-year rule, people in the informal settlements have continued to live in abject poverty, under inhuman conditions. So why should we vote for the ANC and give it a mandate to continue to run the country?

PD: AbM's statement about the policy conference also states "The power that we have been able to build over the years is beginning to bear fruits." Can you elaborate?

TM: That is seen in the result of the recent election (for municipality in November 2021, when the ANC for the first time secured less than 50% of the vote and lost major cities.) The ANC has lost big money. Most importantly, the ANC had to enter into a coalition in the eThekweni municipality, which has been their stronghold. Our call to vote against the ANC, in this province where the Abahlali also has a strong hold, has cost the ANC a major loss in support. People are now voting with conscience, and saying we will not vote for our grave, we will not vote for those who have betrayed the struggle of Nelson Mandela.

PD: The delegates who attended this policy conference also "noted a significant change in terms of how the general public view our Movement." In what manner has the public perception changed?

TM: During the unrest when many forces were perpetrating violence, Abahlali worked for calm and peace in the province. Even small business-owners, the middle class and the liberals have come to acknowledge and praise this work. So the perception about our movement is changing in the general public.

After the unrest, more and more sections of the society are realizing the importance of our struggle to ensure an equitable distribution of the country's resources, to ensure that no child will have to go hungry, and that those who do not have food are right in occupying lands to live and to produce food for their survival. They have come to understand the value of Abahlali's work in ensuring poor Black people are not forced into violence against each other, but are organized to collectively advance the cause of the poor and the marginalized sections.

PD: Congratulating AbM on its conference, many trade unions, grassroots organizations and left political parties in the Southern African region have expressed solidarity. Even organizations beyond the continent, in Latin America and elsewhere, have consistently shown solidarity. Where do you see Abahlali fit in the global class struggle?

TM: The global solidarity we have earned is fundamental to us. Our comrades all over the country, in the region of Africa and the world show their solidarity through protests and demonstrations outside South African embassies, every time we face severe repression here. We really appreciate that and want to build these links. Because ours is not a struggle taking place only in South Africa.

Land-grabbing by corporations of imperialist countries are dispossessing the indigenous and poor people in many countries in South America. Many of the same corporations are also involved in capturing resources from Africans. We have to work together with comrades across the world, because we are not only fighting against capitalism in South Africa, but are playing our role in the struggle to completely dismantle imperialist capitalism as a global system.

20 AUGUST 2022

Presentation · Mqapheli Bonono

Presentation to NUMSA Shop Stewards

Meeting of NUMSA shop stewards, Kimberley, 20 August 2022

Greetings to all Comrades of the WORKING CLASS.

It is an honour and privilege for me to be sharing this platform with the people who share the same struggle as ourselves.

Brief back ground

Abahlali baseMjondolo is a mass democratic, grassroots social movement of the shack dwellers and the poor in South Africa. It is the biggest social movement of the shack dwellers to have emerged in the post-apartheid South Africa with over 105 000 members in five provinces.

The movement was formed in 2005 to fight, promote and advance the interests and dignity of the shack dwellers and the poor in South Africa. The movement campaigns for decent land and housing in our cities, but most importantly Abahlali struggles for human dignity for shack dwellers and the poor. The movement was formed as a result of being sick and tired of the lies of the politicians. A piece of land that was promised to build houses for the poor in Kennedy Road was sold to a businessman. We then blocked the busiest M19 Road access to the city of Durban. This was out of anger and frustration. We had enough of the lies. We continue live in abject poverty.

Organising in the Shadow of death

Our movement continues to face repression from the ANC. We have lost 23 leaders and activists in the fight for land, decent and dignity. We have realised that our dignity as the poor does not count in the eyes of the ANC led government. We have been accused of organising outside of the ruling party. We continue to organise the unorganised. We are killed because of our organising. The ANC is threatened by our art of organising.

We have face brutal evictions at gun point from the state police and armed forces from the eThekweni municipality. Since our movement was formed the

ANC led government wanted to destroy it. We were criticised for organising the poor. We were criticised for creating our own authority. It is not easy to organise the unorganised. It is not easy to the poor and marginalised.

In 2014, a 17 year old Nqobile Nzuza from Cato – Crest was murdered in a protest by the South African police services. Her family and others were facing an eviction from the Anti Land Invasion Unit in the eThekweni Municipality. Her crime is being poor and living in shack.

Samuel Hloele was 29 when he was killed by the Anti Land Invasion Unit in Durban. We was protecting his home from being destroyed by this armed force from the municipality. He was shot from the back and killed in eKukhanyeni Informal Settlements.

Baby Jayden Khoza was only two weeks when he was killed by police teargas in the Foreman Road Informal Settlements. The police attacks residents who were protesting for electricity. When the residents ran to their homes they followed us and teargas the entire community.

Siyabonga Manqela was killed by police in Enkanini Informal Settlements. This is after police raided people's homes and kicked doors. Just like apartheid policing.

All these comrades died in the hands of the brutal system that uses arms against the poor.

Many leaders were attack and killed by hitmen hired (Izinkabi) hired by the ANC politicians. Thuli Ndlovu, Nkululeko Gwala, Thembinkosi Qumbela, Sifiso Ngcobo, Nokuthula Mabaso, Ayanda Ngila are some of our comrades who were killed by hitman hired by the ANC. They were uncovering the corruption in the ANC.

The Importance of Solidarity between Workers and Community Struggles

Comrades we must realise that we are facing a system of Capitalism. A system that is brutal and merciless. Capitalists do not care about us. Their interest is to make profit at all costs. They continue to exploit us. We must unite, and fight against this system.

A worker is a community member before he\{\}she goes to work. The issues of landlessness are our issues as the poor. When workers are being exploited and paid salaries that are below the bread line, it is our responsibility to support the call for a living wage for all. It is our responsibility to call for a Basic Income Grant for all the Unemployed.

When were facing attacks form the state those who were working did not see our struggle as their struggle. It is important that we define the Working Class in the Marx way. 'It is those who sell their labour, those who do not own means of production'.

We are Working Class, We do not own means of Production. We continue to be exploited by Recruiting Agents. We are poor and marginalised. We live in shacks indignity like pigs in the mud.

Comrade this calls us to be United and realise that our struggles are the same. We are Working Class. Your Pain in the Copper belt, Engineering and in every steel industry where workers are exploited is our pain as Abahlali baseMjondolo. We have no one but ourselves.

In order for us to fight against the oppression and exploitation we must unite the struggles of the workers and those in our community. The continuous increase in food prices affect us as communities as if affects you as workers.

Today we want to assure NUMSA our solidarity. NUMSA has been there when we are killed by the ANC. That for us is Solidarity in practice.

Amandla!!

12 MARCH 2023

Essay · Thapelo Mohapi

Fight Poverty, Not the Poor: We Who Live in Shacks Are Not a Threat to Society

Published in the Daily Maverick

Everywhere in the world the poor are criminalised, and in countries like Brazil, the United States and South Africa, governed with violence. In South Africa where there is, for some good reason, deep anxiety about the levels of violence in society, the general and worsening criminalisation of the poor poses real risks to our safety.

Emfuleni in Cape Town had the highest recorded number of murders in the last quarter of the crime statistics that were released by Police Minister Bheki Cele. As always the blame has been shifted to what some people call the “mushrooming of shacks” and even that old colonial idea of “overpopulation”.

These are the narratives that are used in the media and by the rich. It is a narrative that says that if you are poor you do not belong in the cities, and if we find our own way into the cities, and the opportunities to be found there, you are a threat to society.

In fact it is clear that we are regarded as human waste and not as human beings. We simply do not count to society. There are so many examples to show this.

When Zamekile Shangase from Umzimkhulu who had come to Durban to seek better opportunities was shot dead by the police in Asiyindawo in a “show your receipt” raid in the Lamontville shack settlement in Durban on 29 July 2021, the initial media reports did not even mention her name. Not a single resident from the settlement was quoted in these reports.

It was stated as a fact that the police had come under fire from dangerous gangsters and that a nameless woman had been killed in the crossfire. It was later shown that no resident had fired on the police. It was clear that the life of Shangase counted for nothing. It was also clear that the whole community had been criminalised in order to justify a police killing.

This was a particularly crude incident of poor people being treated as human waste and criminalised. It happens all the time though. If we believe in equality, and the need to respect and affirm the dignity of all people, then we should not speak of the places where people are trying to find a foothold in the cities as “mushrooming”.

Shacks are homes to millions of people in this country. More than a billion people live in shacks around the world. This is where people fall in love, raise children, find ways to make a living and just live their lives.

The people who live in shacks should be recognised as humans, as people who should be supported to develop their communities and not as a threat to society.

We are part of society, often doing the work on which elite society depends, such as domestic work, security work and labour on construction sites. We build the cities and keep them clean and safe. We must be given the same respect as all other people.

When we organise to insist on the recognition of our dignity, criminalisation gets much, much worse. The police shoot at us with rubber bullets and beat us in protests.

We are regularly arrested and charged with “public violence” for the crime of actually appearing in public as a politically organised force.

Sometimes we are tortured in the police stations, or even murdered by the police. The police seldom investigate when our leaders are assassinated, and they never act when municipalities illegally and violently destroy our homes.

Of course, South Africa does have a very serious problem of violence, and of violent crime. As with all the other problems that make up the crisis faced by our country, the poor are worst affected. We do not have brick houses, high walls, alarms or private security. We are always vulnerable.

But the police stations in our communities are not there to support us. These are the same places where we are taken, and sometimes seriously hurt, when we stand up to insist on our human dignity.

Even the decent people working in the police can do very little to support us as the whole system exists to oppress us. We have called for democratic forms of community control of the police, but of course this government would never allow that.

We will not be able to reduce the violence in society, and the often-vicious predation on the vulnerable, unless we make some major changes to how society is organised.

There needs to be a massive investment in the poor, a clear commitment to building a society in which everyone is respected, opportunities provided for the millions of young people who are stuck in permanent unemployment and a massive campaign against corruption.

When people know that they are respected and can believe in society and in the future, far fewer people will be sucked into the lifestyles in which some turn on others, leaving personal and social destruction in their wake.

It was the ordinary people of this country who defeated apartheid, not the ANC in exile. Yet in 1994 our parents who had risked their lives in the Struggle were told to go home because the ANC would now lead. The NGOs also took their own place as leaders.

When poor people started to protest and organise, it was always said that they were criminals, or that they were the “third force”, a plot to undermine democracy.

Abahlali baseMjondolo, the organisation that I have served for 10 years, was formed to change this narrative. From the beginning the movement, which now has more than 115,000 members in good standing across four provinces, has insisted that people who are poor and live in shacks can think for themselves and that we should be able to participate in all decision-making that affects us.

Being poor does not mean that your state of mind has collapsed. It just means that you do not have money. And we do not have money because we were made poor by colonialism and apartheid and kept poor by the ANC.

There therefore needs to be a political solution to change the social structures that keep us poor, as well as to overcome the corruption and repression of the ANC.

As people get more desperate, more hungry and more hopeless about the country, and as people become even more cynical about the police, the government and the political parties, society is likely to become more violent. Using dehumanising language and sending out the police to commit more violence against the poor will only make things worse.

The most important way to make this society safer for us all is to restore trust in the present and hope for the future. We need a new political vision for

a society based on respect for human dignity, a society in which everyone is valued and welcomed to contribute, a society in which it is clear that poverty is the problem, and not poor people.

In other words, let's fight poverty and not the poor. This is the way to build a society in which we are all safe.

We will continue to fight for our dignity even though we are not recognised as human beings by our government, and even though our leaders are being regularly jailed and assassinated.

We invite all other people of goodwill to join us, in their own way, as we seek a way out of the current crisis and into a future in which every person is valued, and no one is treated as waste.

17 JULY 2023

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Opening Remarks to the Dilemmas of Humanity Pan-Conference

Dilemmas of Humanity conference, Bela Bela, 17 July 2023

Comrade Programme director, Cde Irvin Jim, Cde Kwesi and Cde Cosmos. Our warmest welcome to our comrades from across Africa. It is wonderful for us all to be together here at the Nkrumah School. Our struggle to humanise the world embraces the whole world and pan-Africanism and internationalism are central to our struggle.

We must thank Pan-African Today, which is now led by Cde Jonis Ghedi Alasow, for connecting radical organisations across Africa and for running the Nkrumah School which has been a wonderful contribution to our struggles. It has given confidence to many of our leaders and enabled a grassroots pan-Africanism, a movement-to-movement pan-Africanism, that has never been possible before.

We have a Frantz Fanon School in Durban, in the eKhenana Commune. Comrades who study there then come here to the Nkrumah School and the Amalcal Cabral School in Ghana, and the next step is to go the ENFF School of the MST in Brazil. These schools are a huge achievement for our struggles and we need to do all that we can to protect and advance them. We need to ensure that we build more and more movement managed political schools across Africa and around the world.

Comrades, yesterday I was called to the Kennedy Road settlement in Durban where our movement was formed, and where I lived for many years. A thousand people had lost their homes in a terrible fire. Almost thirty years after apartheid we continue to live in life threatening circumstances. Our lives do not count to society. In fact, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Almost 70% of young people are unemployed. Violence is becoming worse and worse.

When we stand up for our humanity we face prison and assassination. Last year three of our comrades were assassinated, and a fourth was murdered by

masked police officers. There is no democracy for the poor and no justice for the poor.

We did not know that when we insisted on our humanity, we would find ourselves in a war. But we are in a war – a war that is fought with live bullets, rubber bullets, tear gas, courts, prisons, lies and slander. We fight that war in our occupations, in the courts and in the media. We fight it with our unity and courage. We fight it by insisting on our humanity and on the full and equal humanity of all people.

Make no mistake comrades, the ANC are our new oppressors. They leave us to live like pigs in the mud and jail and murder us when we insist on our human dignity. Our people now refer to them as ‘amasela’ and ‘ababulali’ – thieves and murderers. Our people are not wrong.

Although the ANC have betrayed the people that brought them to power our people are not defeated. Resistance continues. Our movement continues to grow. Some of our comrades have committed themselves to ‘socialism or death’. Nothing is possible without courage and we are surrounded by courage.

We know that we were made poor so that others could be made rich. We know that we are kept poor so that others can remain rich. We know that there is enough wealth in the world to ensure that poverty is abolished.

There can be no justice until the capitalist system is removed from this earth and land, wealth and power are fairly shared. For us socialism, or what we have sometimes called a ‘living communism’, must be built from below commune by commune. Socialism is not just an idea. It is a way of living. But we know that the ANC and the state are monsters that will destroy all our efforts if we are not able to build enough power to defend our gains. To be strong we must be together.

We also know that even a partial victory in one country will quickly come under attack from the imperialist powers. We have seen what happened in Haiti, in Bolivia and in many other countries.

These realities can seem overwhelming. But we do not suffer alone. The poor of Harare, Nairobi, Lagos, Accra and cities across Africa face the same oppression, as do the poor of Sao Paulo, Bombay and cities across the world. Workers face the same oppression around the world. There is also resistance everywhere. All over the world there are people saying no to oppression and yes to human dignity. All over the world there are people saying that the wealth of the world belongs to all the people of the world.

On our own we are vulnerable. Together we are strong. Together we can win. Together we can humanise the world.

Our movement is rooted in land occupations across the country. We hope to turn each occupation into a democratically managed and productive commune where there is no rent and land is not bought and sold. We hope to build a movement of communes and then a pan-African and international movement of movements.

The great challenge for us has been the difficulties in connecting with radical movements across Africa and around the world. PAT and the Nkrumah School have made a huge contribution in advancing our ability to be closely connected to movements in other countries, and they have always respected the autonomy and internal democracy of the movements that they engage.

This question of how we link our movements and struggles across Africa and around the world is critical because in the past NGOs controlled all the networking. They have claimed to represent us when they have no mandate to do so. They have marginalised and tried to undermine organisations that take direction from their members instead of NGOs. This is what happened within South Africa with the Social Movements' Indaba (SMI) and internationally with the World Social Forum.

There are some left NGOs, like PAT and the Socio-Economic Rights Institute here in South Africa, that are able to work with movements on a democratic and respectful basis to support the building of the power of the oppressed. These NGOs have our respect. They are our comrades.

However, some left NGOs and academics think that they should substitute themselves for our movement, that they should think and decide for us. We must be vigilant about attempts at NGO capture of movements, organisations and their spaces, events and other projects.

The autonomy of popular organisations must be respected and it must be clearly understood that while NGOs and academics are welcome to participate in movement spaces when invited to do so they have no right to assume that they should have the power to give political direction to the organisations of the poor and the working class. Our organisations are strong because they take their political direction from their members and on this principle, there can be no compromise.

Because our humanity is non-negotiable our autonomy and right to think and decide for ourselves is non-negotiable.

In many countries the forces of oppression are trying to divide the oppressed against each other on the basis of religion, language, ethnicity and so on. Here there is a major attempt to divide the poor by blaming migrants for the problems faced by the majority of people. Oppression wants to turn us against each other so that we don't unite against oppression. This is a great danger that confronts our hopes for justice. Nobody is poor because their neighbour speaks a different language, follows a different religion or was born in a different country. This is why we say that a neighbour is a neighbour, a worker is a worker and a comrade is a comrade no matter where they were born, what religion they follow or what language they speak.

In all our countries it is vital that we resist these attempts to divide the oppressed. We have to build unity in struggle and unity between struggles.

This meeting is a wonderful opportunity for us to get to know each other personally, to learn about each other's organisations and struggles, to build unity and to take our struggles forward, to begin to build a movement of movements and to identify and confront our real enemies.

Each of us who is here today has been entrusted by our organisations to undertake this important work. We have been entrusted with a very important responsibility. If we can use these next few days wisely, we can build a platform to ensure real solidarity in the future, a living solidarity, and to take our struggles to a higher level.

Every comrade here has something to learn from every other comrade here. Every movement has something to learn from every other movement here. This week should be a time for learning and growth. Our political school in Durban is named after the great philosopher Frantz Fanon. Fanon famously said that "Every generation must discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it."

This is the task that we have to take forward this week. If we use this wonderful opportunity wisely, we will look back on this week in years to come as a week that opened up new possibilities for solidarity and struggle, new possibilities to humanise the world and new possibilities for the humanity and dignity of all people to be recognised. Let us use this week to take us forward in the work to discover and fulfil our mission.

29 JULY 2023

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Building a movement of courage and dignity

Active Citizens' Movement general meeting, Durban, 29 July 2023

Thank you, programme director, for this wonderful opportunity. Greeting comrades, friends and colleagues. May I take this opportunity to extend my deepest gratitude to all comrades from the Active Citizens Movement, particular Comrade Yashika for inviting Abahlali to speak here at this Biannual General Assembly. I must also thank Abahlali baseMjondolo, a movement that has entrusted me with the responsibility to speak here today.

We cannot begin to address the worsening crisis in our country if we do not work together. We need as many progressive organisations as possible to find issues where there is shared commitment and to work together, with mutual respect, on these issues. Of course each organisation has its own history and character, its own set of key issues and its own principles. We do not have to agree on everything in order to work together on issues where there is shared commitment.

Our movement is democratic. For us democracy – real popular democracy, direct democracy, democracy that is in the hands of the oppressed – is both the means of our struggle and its goal. You cannot say that the dignity of the people should be achieved in the future while denying it in the present. You cannot make meaningful changes without the people building their own power from below.

We hold monthly general assemblies to deliberate together on issues that affect our communities on a day-to-day basis. These general assemblies are open to all, and democratic to everyone that attends them. They are not only attended by Abahlali members but also by people from non-affiliated communities and individuals that care about their communities and their country.

Our movement was founded on the principles and values of ubuntu, on the recognition of the full and equal humanity of every human person. We call our philosophy of praxis ubuhlalism. This philosophy is deeply rooted into the idea

that everyone was born into this world with dignity and deserves to be treated with respect and dignity.

Our country faces a lot of challenges ranging from mass impoverishment, to social abandonment and pervasive violence, state repression, corruption, political gangsterism and climate change. Most young people do not have work and unless something changes they will never have work. Without hope many young people sink into depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and sometimes addiction.

The poor and the working class are pushed into the margins and denied a voice. The political elites in the ANC and the state, and sometimes in NGOs too, make decisions about us and our future without us.

This crisis require all people of conscience to stand together in solidarity and take on the work of thinking together and working together to humanise society.

When we found ourselves poor, desperate, alone, forced to live like pigs in the mud and abandoned by the state we got together, thought together and built a movement together. We built a movement of dignity, a movement where the dignity of the poor is recognised and affirmed and where we struggle together to get the same recognition from wider society. When that movement was met with violence and repression our movement of dignity had to become a movement of courage and dignity.

Before we formed our movement many of us had started to organise communities to build unity and an enabling environment for government to deliver to its promises. We did not just fold our arms and wait for handouts. We registered NPOs and ran drop-in centres that were aiming at uplifting our communities, such as early child development centres. We ran community gardens and feeding schemes and worked with local businessmen to make sure that no one went hungry and to try to find employment for people in our communities. We remained passionately committed to our communities and patriotic to our country. At the same time we worked hard to democratise our settlements. We committed ourselves to the project of nation building as envisaged by Nelson Mandela and others. We were inspired by the values of our constitutional democracy and held our flag so high.

We knew that change was not going to be easy. We knew that the damages of the past were not going to go away any time soon. We also thought that the pain

that we had experienced in the hands of the white minority government was the pain of the past. We were very aware of our responsibilities as impoverished communities to work for our country and contribute to peace building, unity and harmony.

But being good citizens, loyal to the elected government and the new democracy, did not help us. Local politicians were always prepared to lie to us and treat us like children. Lies were put before the truth, the commercial value of land was put before its social value and party control before popular democracy. At the national level politicians decided that our shackles must be eradicated. This project was driven by Mike Sutcliffe in Durban and we were forced off our land and our homes were destroyed at gun point in the name of 'development'.

We remained impoverished, excluded, silenced and living without jobs or hope. Our dignity was not respected. In fact our humanity was vandalised. This is why we had to break from the ANC, build our own movement and develop a progressive politics of the strong poor. This was a homemade politics which, because it gave a home to the oppressed, continued to grow despite severe repression. We currently have more than 120 000 members in good standing in four provinces.

Today the gains of our Constitutional democracy, which are important even if limited gains, gains won by the struggles of the people, are being reversed.

Last weekend armed men from the land invasion unit here in Durban showed up to tell us that a meeting was an 'illegal gathering' and to shut the meeting down. It is their actions that were illegal. We have been beaten, arrested, had our homes destroyed, slandered, jailed and murdered for the crime of standing up for our dignity and for justice. More than twenty of our members have lost their lives in the course of our struggle, with the majority being lost to assassination.

Today we continue to live in shacks of indignity like pigs in the muds. Today we continue to face state repression each time we insist on the dignity of the people. Today we remain without land and decent houses. Today we remain poor in a rich country. Today many communities in both rural and urban areas are still without basic services such as water, roads and electricity. Today many schools and hospitals are crumbling dirty places that insult the dignity of our people. Today the whole nation is dark as a result of the energy crisis.

We know that while we suffer we live in most productive economy in human history with enough resources to feed, clothe, house and educate everybody. These resources are not shared fairly because of the greed that drives the dominant global economic system. That economic system is capitalism.

Capitalism is monster that mangles our lives and hopes as it puts profit before human needs and destroys the earth. It has degraded the very values that makes our society more humane. Capitalism is supported by imperialism. In South Africa and across the world it makes a minority rich while the majority remain poor.

Of course capitalism is not the only monster that we must confront. The political gangsterism that has taken over much of the ANC and the state, and some other parties, also robs us of our hopes, and the possibility of building a decent society. Abahlali have acted against state corruption when public money meant to develop our communities has been stolen and services and houses have only been allocated to ANC members or those who can pay for them. We have named and shamed high-ranking politicians implicated in corrupt activities. The price for this has sometimes been paid in blood. Leaders like Nkululeko Gwala, Thuli Ndlovu and Sifiso Ngcobo have been assassinated for speaking out against corruption.

In the face of all this, and at the cost of 25 lives, we have built a movement of courage and dignity committed to the flourishing of this country and its people. We work with others in South Africa, across Africa and around the world to build a movement of movements committed to building a world where land, wealth and power are fairly shared, a world where everyone is safe and everyone's dignity is respected.

We do not only make demands to the state. We work to build communities from below. We build and run creches, gardens, meeting halls, and much more. We work to build communities of care in which people thrown together by the forces of structural oppression support each other like families. It is this family feeling between neighbours, in communities and in the movement that allows us to survive and keep going. Often the middle classes will not find this work threatening.

But we also have a political school, the Frantz Fanon school at the eKhenana Commune in Cato Crest, and participate in the work of other political schools such as the Nkrumah School in Bela Bela, the Amilcar Cabral School in Ghana

and the ENFF school in Brazil. These are movement run radical schools where we learn, teach and discuss the experiences of struggles around the world and the ideas of thinkers that come out of struggle, thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Angela Davis, Paulo Freire, our comrade Ruthie Wilson Gilmour, and many other great thinkers.

This world is a world of extreme oppression, a world that must change radically, a world that requires radical ideas and radical action towards humanising the world.

And, yes, we do reject the idea, introduced by colonialism and enforced today by capitalism, that land should be allocated on the basis of private profit rather than social need and the public good. When people have no land Abahlali have occupied vacant and unused land so that those who are homeless can build a place to call home for their families, develop a community and have a place in a city.

These occupations are not 'land invasions' or 'land grabs'. They are urban planning from below. They are decommodification from below.

There are people, usually linked to the ANC who seize land with the aim of being able to rent or sell it, to get tenders to provide services and build houses, and to sell access to services and houses. In these cases the shack settlements that arise are ruled with an iron fist. This is violent privatisation and commodification of land from below.

A parcel of land big enough to build ten shacks goes for around R50 000. Shacks are sold for between R10 000 to R30 000 and rented for between R700 to R 1 500.

In our occupations rent and the buying and selling of land are not permitted. A branch can only remain in good standing when it follows this and other principles of our movement such as democratic forms of organisations and opposition to xenophobia and sexism.

In the logic of oppression impoverishment is not seen as a question of justice. When the poor have no place in their city it is not seen as the question of justice. But when they occupy land, their actions are seen as a question of law and order, even criminality. Where there is no provision of basic services and the poor, like any other human beings, require these services they will connect themselves. This too is seen as a matter of law and order, even criminality.

There is something deeply wrong with society when land and water are only available to those who can pay, or who are close to the ruling party. Taking some small steps to give the oppressed a place in the world, to share a little of the world, cannot be considered to be criminal by anyone who respects the humanity of all people. In fact these actions are small but important contributions to the humanisation of the world.

Today I wish to take this opportunity and make a call that South Africa belongs to the people, all the people that live here, and not to the politicians. They do not own this country and they do not own us. We all have the responsibility to build a movement of movements from below. We have been working to organise the oppressed since 2005, to take our place in the long history of building popular organisation that goes back to the UDF in the 1980s, the trade union movement that began here in Durban fifty years ago and right back to the ICU in the 1930s.

We do not only organise the strong poor within our own movement. We are also part of the Durban Coalition, an alliance of progressive organisations and professionals from a range of disciplines, and a range of individuals committed to building a city for all. Abahlali is also part of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Network (ESCR-Net) a global network made up 300 organisations and individuals from over 70 countries. We are in alliance with progressive organisations, movements and unions across South Africa and elsewhere in the world, such as the MST, the movement of the landless in Brazil.

In this crisis it is imperative that we work to organise the poor and the working class on a progressive and democratic process, and build their power and unity. We must identify possible allies and build solidarity between and within the poor and the working class and, where possible, with progressive people in the middle classes too. When we are together, we are stronger and there is no doubt that when we are strong we can become a real threat to the forces that are determined to keep us divided and weak.

It is also imperative that we all work to unite and defend migrants and other minorities in this country who are facing violence and discrimination. A neighbour is a neighbour, a worker is a worker and a comrade is comrade without regard to what language they speak and the place where they were born. We have said over and over that unyawo alunampumulo – a person is a person no matter where they were born.

Today I wish to congratulate the Active Citizens' Movement for being consistent in speaking out against corruption. We have seen your courage in advocating for the rights and safety of whistle blowers in this country. You understand the importance and urgency of this work. Imagine what would happen if we were all afraid to speak out against all the injustices and social ills that are destroying our country. South Africa would sink into catastrophe.

Nokuthula Mabaso, Thuli Ndlovu, Babita Deokaran and many more who have demonstrated such a high level of courage and integrity are gone. These are just a few names of our heroes whose courage remains with our hearts. May their spirit of courage and integrity live with us as we love and honour them. May their spirit and courage be with us all as work to build more movements of courage and dignity, and a national and international movement of progressive movements.

Today we also say that our freedom is not complete without the freedom of the Palestinians and their right to self-determination. We express our full solidarity with the Palestinians and all the many struggling communities and nations across the world.

Woza moya oyingcwele.

I thank you.

1 SEPTEMBER 2023

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Democratisation of the built environment

Built Environment Climate Change Indaba, 1 September 2023

Programmer director, Minister Khuzeni, MEC Nkosi, Mayor of eThekweni, Cllr Kaunda, President of SALGA, Mama Mtshali, CEO of CBE, academia, officials and civil society formations, Abahlali baseMjondolo delegates, ladies and gentlemen. I wish to thank CBE for inviting Abahlali to participate in this important discussion on the built environment and climate change.

In most cases impoverished communities are not invited to participate in spaces that discuss their future and we welcome this invitation to contribute to this meeting. The built environment itself, and the planning processes that shape the built environment, must be democratised. There is the same urgency to democratise planning and action around climate change.

The power to allocate land, and to plan for land use, cannot only be exercised by the state and the rich. Democracy has to mean more than just voting every few years. It has to mean day to day participation in decision making and democratic self-management. Yes, impoverished communities need to be educated on some matters by the various kinds of experts that shape our built environment and strategies around climate change. But these experts should also allow themselves to be educated by impoverished communities.

Everybody wants to live in safe, beautiful cities organised for human flourishing. But it is the poor who are living in the worst conditions and need the most urgent support to improve their living conditions. It is also the poor who suffer the most from dangerous weather, such as floods and high winds. The climate crisis will affect the poor the most. Denying the people who are most at risk from climate change the right to participate in discussions and planning is unjust.

These questions cannot be discussed without discussing the wider context of oppression, including impoverishment, denial of access to land and decent housing, mass unemployment, terrifying levels of violence and brutal forms of

political repression. The question of dignity is paramount. Any credible process of engaging these questions must start from a recognition of the dignity of the oppressed, develop a process for a way forward that respects our dignity and aim at solutions that do the same.

This indaba must confront the question of land, including urban land. The majority of the land remains in the hands of a minority, and the ongoing commodification of land means that it remains forever out of the reach of the poor. There can be no justice until land is allocated and its use and management determined on the basis of social need rather than private profit.

The government needs to support the land reform being undertaken from below, by the people themselves, and to urgently engage in a programme of rapid land release for the landless majority of this country. This land should not be commodified and should be collectively owned and managed. Rapid release of land will mean that there is no longer a need for land occupations in our urban centres. In some cases people have, due to desperation, occupied land in extremely dangerous spaces such as river banks or flood plains. This would not happen if people had access to land well suited to form communities.

If the use of the land can be democratically planned on the basis of social need rather than private profit it can be used to build thriving, productive communities who are not forced to live in dangerously overcrowded conditions. It can put an end to the shack fires that haunt the dreams of our children and often result in the loss of lives.

Just last Sunday five babies were burnt beyond recognition during a shack fire in the Itireleng settlement in Pretoria. Just yesterday another terrible fire broke out in Johannesburg CBD leaving over 70 killed. This is deeply disturbing and unfair. An urgent solution needs to be found. When the majority of this country remain landless then land occupations are the only mechanism to people's-built environment from below.

We need to be very clear that in the absence of land reform from above people have had no choice but to undertake land reform from below. In some cases this has resulted in well planning and democratically managed communities. But all land occupations face intense and illegal violence from all kinds of security agencies are deployed to unleash violence on people. When it is insisted that occupied land must not be commodified and must be managed by democratic

processes there has also been serious violence, including assassinations carried out by the izinkabi.

In the minds of the elites access to land, a question of justice, becomes the question of law and order. The poor are criminalised.

We live in the country where the right to housing is constitutionally recognised, but where there is no right to land. We live in a country where the state is unable to build housing for all the poor, but where those who build modest homes for themselves are repeatedly destroyed with violence. In some cases, the same people have been evicted more than 30 times without regard for what national legislation provides. Some municipalities, like eThekweni, have been ignoring court orders. Shack dwellers have been treated as if they are beneath the law. Lies are put before the truth, promises made are broken, profit is put before people's need and the commercial value of land continues to be placed before its social value.

Responding to climate change will require real change in governance, real change in how people on the ground are treated, real change on how land is allocated and managed, real change in the legislations and a real commitment to put people and the earth before profit. Recently the eKhenana Commune, which is affiliated to our movement, was celebrated as a model of sustainably development in an international publication. It has an organic garden and solar power along with all kinds of other achievements. Yet three of the comrades there were assassinated last year, and there has been all kinds of repression and violence, including numerous illegal evictions. There is something seriously wrong with our country when innovation from below is met with violence from the state and the izinkabi.

Planning also needs to be democratised. Over the years we have seen many studies that are biased to the middle class and rich.

In terms of our own role in the struggle to stop the vandalization of the earth by capitalism we work with progressive organisations across Africa and around the world to try and build a global movement of anti-capitalist movements with the goal of putting both people and the earth before profit. We have to clearly understand that it is capitalism that is destroying the earth and that there can be no real solution to the climate crisis under capitalism.

However, of course we do support all attempts at making any kind of progress in defence of our earth, including regulations that force reductions

in carbon emissions. For instance we welcome attempts to ensure that all new public housing has solar geysers. Projects like this should be further expanded.

We have been able to work with progressive environmental organisations like groundWork, who worked with us to install solar power in the eKhenana Commune. This is an initiative that should be expanded across all shack settlements.

Programme director our submissions in this indaba are as follows:

There must be a rapid release of land for housing and community farming, and an end to evictions.

There must be provision of serviced sites where government is unable to build housing for the people so that those who can afford to build for themselves can actually do so.

The social value of land must come before its commercial value.

Communities must be supported to build democratically managed and productive communes.

Information on climate change must be made available to people in their own local languages and social movements like Abahlali be able to use it in their popular education programmes.

There must be a serious and democratic dialogue on developing and managing the built environment and climate change in each city and province and nationally. This must include all membership-based grassroots formations to pave the way towards an inclusive future for South Africa.

All experts employed or contracted by the state and NGOs to develop policies and practices around the built environment and climate change must engage poor people with respect. All planning must be participatory. No kind of development should be imposed on people without their consent.

There must be a serious programme of job creation.

There must a serious programme of support for young people struggling with addiction, including the building of caring rehab centres in working class and poor communities.

There must be an ongoing massive national campaign against violence against women, including strong support for survivors.

There must be a massive campaign against xenophobia and a collective project to build solidarity among all our people, without regard to where they were born.

Corruption is a serious problem in our country and the state must incentives and protect whistle blowers to encourage them in the fight against corruption and act decisively against people shown to have been guilty of corruption.

Today we ask you to work with us as we work towards a world in which each person count as a person, a world in which the dignity of every human being is respected, a world in which our cities are built and run to support human flourishing.

I thank you.

5 OCTOBER 2023

Talk · Mqapheli Bonono

The right to decent housing in South Africa

Talk to an audience of Canadian students, 5 October 2023

Thank you, programme director, for this wonderful opportunity to share Abahlali's perspective on this important topic of the right to decent housing in South Africa. Greeting to students and all participants.

According to the official statistics, there are about 2700 informal settlements in South Africa. We are also told that about 12 000 people live in substandard housing conditions. Clearly there is a high rate of homelessness in our country.

Background as to what caused homelessness in South Africa.

South Africa has a history of colonialism and apartheid that only ended in 1994, just 29 years ago. During apartheid most black people were not allowed to travel and to have homes in cities. The apartheid laws and government made it almost impossible for black people to have a place called home in towns and cities. If you were to come to cities black people needed to obtain a permit. Remember those days black townships that were underdeveloped, meaning there were no jobs, there were infrastructure, etc., for black people. Thanks to the struggle against apartheid led by the United Democratic Front, ordinary South Africans with the help of international communities, defeated apartheid.

Homelessness is caused by a wide range of reasons. These reasons include the economic policy and trajectory government has chosen. It includes austerity measures. It includes government priorities. It includes the high rate of unemployment. State corruption is a pandemic that has taken over our governance systems and structures. State housing is now benefiting those who do not qualify just because there are aligned to the ruling party the African National Congress. And yes, it includes the of land and housing. It is for this reason that Abahlali is calling for the social value of land to be placed before its commercial value.

Housing policy

South Africa has a good constitution that guarantees all the rights that are embodied by international standards and norms. South Africa's housing policy is very progressive on paper. It calls for the upgrading of informal settlements. It sees a house as a tool for poverty alleviation. It sees the house as a skill development tool and a skill's transfer mechanism. After all, a house is supposed to provide security and comfort. However, the policy has its own gaps opened to abuse by the state itself. For instance, there are no democratic housing allocation committees. That is why politicians abuse the housing scheme for politicking purposes and to benefit its family members and close comrades.

Reality on the ground.

On the ground people are neglected, people are stuck in deep poverty and are living in extremely dangerous housing conditions. On the ground there is hardly any access to basic services such as water, sanitation and electricity. There is often no road access, no refuse collection. As a result, people use self-connected electricity, they use candles as a source of light and they use paraffin stoves that explode. All of this results to shack fires and lives are lost.

The reality on the ground is that vast amount of agriculture land remains in the hands of the few mostly white commercial farmers. 87% of land is owned by these few farmers while only 13% of the land is in the hands of the majority. This is happening under the watch of the black majority government. While race and apartheid were big challenges today we learn of something deeper than that. That black people cannot liberate their own black people who slaves of the apartheid regime together with them.

These are the reasons that compelled Abahlali to come together and form this movement to resist indignity and exclusion.

I thank you.

13 OCTOBER 2023

Interview · Thapelo Mohapi

When We Speak About Humanity We Speak About Socialism

Interview, Peoples Dispatch, 13 October 2023, on the eve of the Dilemmas of Humanity conference

Peoples Dispatch: We're just on the eve of the Dilemmas conference. Can you first tell us why a little bit about this conference? Why is it important for Abahlali to participate and what are your expectations of the conference?

Thapelo Mohapi: The conference that is taking place here is discussing crucial issues that are facing humanity. Capitalism has taken over and we need to rise up and fight against it. And the exploitation of the working class, basic services not provided to the needy in the informal settlements. And we continue to go poor on a daily basis because of the greed of the capitalist system in this country.

So the conference aims to discuss that and find solutions. Because solutions can be only found by the people organized at grassroots level. It is us who can implement socialism, socialism that is going to take us forward. So we are here today on the eve to say that we want to confirm and affirm our future as socialist, that we are going to fight against the evils of the capitalist system.

PD: And we know that there will be a delegation coming from the movement. Can you talk a bit about some of the areas that Abahlali will speak about? What are the major interests in the countries for the movement?

TM: We are going to speak about the crisis that we are finding ourselves in around the world, and we are continuing to be repressed and attacked by a brutal state in this country. And we understand that our comrades in Palestine, as we speak, are subjected to a very forceful, very greedy government, an apartheid state of Israel, supported by the US. It's an imperial combination that is trying by all means and to repress, suppress and even kill innocent people in Palestine. And we are saying to the people of Palestine, our hearts and souls are with you.

And one day, we will be there and enjoying the land that belongs to you that continues to be invaded by the government of Israel.

PD: Can you tell us a bit about the movement? What are the current issues that Abahlali is fighting for? TM: Yes, Abahlali baseMjondolo is basically a shack dwellers movement. It was formed in 2005 to fight for, defend and advance the interest of the poor and marginalized people of South Africa, particularly those who live in the informal settlement, who live in the shacks, those who live under inhuman conditions, in the favelas where there's no electricity, there's no water, there's no services at all.

We understand that we are being impoverished. And therefore we are saying the dignity of the poor must be recognized. And we affirm that and it is an ideal that we are prepared to fight for, because we can't live in a country where inequality grows on a daily basis.

We are the most unequal country in the world, and therefore we cannot sit and watch as that happens. So we are for humanity, and we believe that a human being is a human being wherever and whenever they find themselves.

We are against any forms of xenophobia, we are against any form of race discrimination, and we want to tackle those head on. And therefore, that's why we are building the power of the people from below, because we believe that the people can be stewards of their own struggles, and the struggles of the people of Palestine, the struggles of the people around the world who are oppressed in the region, in Africa is the struggle of the people of South Africa.

And therefore, that's why we are convening this conference to say that let's discuss our own issues, because the solutions to these issues can only come from the oppressed.

So the people that are going to be here are people from social movements who are organizing from below and we are fighting against hunger. It can't be that there are people who have houses that they only come to for holidays when they are people who are walking and sleeping under the bridges because they are homeless.

It can't be like that. And we want humanity. And when we speak about humanity we speak about socialism, because socialism speaks about sharing the means of production, sharing the wealth to everyone, and so that we become an equal society where no one will be exploited. Right now we are in a situation where the working class has been exploited.

People are paid peanuts for working long hours and services are not given to the poor and marginalized in this country. And therefore and this is a situation all over the world, we are seeing capitalists coming to us. And if we are not going to fight capitalism, we will continue to be exploited and therefore this conference will affirm that we will fight all forms of exploitation, repression and oppression, and we will fight that even if it means our lives perish in the process.

21 APRIL 2024

Speech · S'bu Zikode

Iminyaka engamashumi amathathu yosizi nenhlupheko kwabampofu

UnFreedom Day, 21 April 2024

Mphathi wohlelo, baholi baba hlali baseMjondolo ngokuhlukana kwenu, baholi bemibutho yonke yemiphakathi, basebenzi, baholi bezombusazwe, partners, manene namanenekazi, MaGoza Amahle.

Umbutho wabahlali baseMjondolo wasungulwa eminyakeni eyishumi nesishiyagalolunye eyadlula. Usungulelwa ukulwela, ukuvikela nokuthuthukisa isithunzi sabantu abahlala emijondolo.

Namhlanje kuphela iminyaka engamashumi amathathu izwe lathola inkululeko, liyitholela abavele benothile. Kodwa iningi labantu bakithi libhekene nendluzula yobubha nosizi oluyisimanga. Namhlanje sizothi ayikabibikho inkululeko kwabampofu. Ayikho inkululeko izinkulungwane zabantu bakithi besahlala emikhukhwini, abanye sekuphele iminyaka behlala emathinini. Ayikho inkululeko umhlaba wezwe lakithi ungakabuyi kubanini bawo. Ayikho inkululeko iningi labantu bakithi bengasebenzi bebhqwabhuqwa yindlala. Abantwana bethu bebhqwabhuqwa izidakamizwa nophuzo oludakayo. Abantwana bethu, nasebefundile bachitha iminyaka emanyuvesi, abanye babo abangodokotela namhlanje. Bahlale iminyaka eyisikhombisa e medical school namhlanje abasebenzi. Ubugebengu obuyisimanga nodlame olubhekiswe kubantu ababuthaka kulelizwe abantu besifazane nabantwana. Udlame nesihluku sokubulawa kwabaholi babahlali baseMjondolo nababika ngenkohlakalo ezinhlakeni ezahlukeni zikahulumeni. Ukungalingani phakathi kwabantu abadla izambane likapondo nabanothile. Izwe lakithi likhungethwe yinkohlakalo eyisimanga. Iningi Labantu bakithi alisebenzi liphila ngokukhangeza, nangezibonelelo zika hulumeni.

Mphathi wohlelo nginomzekelo wempilo ebuhlungu ephila ngabantwana bethu eNingizimu Afrika. Lena yimpilo ka Thulile Makamu wase Tembisa,

Vusimuzi Section e Gauteng province. U Thulile uthi “I now mark 11 years without a job, I graduated in 2014 at Tshwane University of Technology. I obtained National Diploma in Management. In 2018 I obtained a Postgraduate Certificate in Education with distinctions at the University of South Africa. In 2019 I graduated and obtained Honours Bacher of Education in Educational Management at University of South Africa. Last month I just did a baking training course at Chef Institution of South Africa. I now see that we do not have freedom at all and we are mourning indeed”. She goes on to say “actually we are not only mourning on the 21 April. Every day is a mourning day”.

Imiphakathi yakithi ezindaweni zase makhaya sibeke sakhula amanzi abanawo, kuze kube namhlanje. Leli yihlazo, fubecause I wanted to take out the stress of being unemployedthi yisono esesabekayo ukuncisha abantu amanzi. Abahlali base Verulam, koNanda, Mzinyathi abanawo amanzi kodwa bakhele amadamu amakhulukazi eThekwini I Hazelmere dam kanye ne Inanda dam. Isizathu ukuthi kuno sonkontileka bama thenda okumele banikezwe umsebenzi wokuthutha amanzi ngama truck ukuze bacebe, hhayi ngoba amanzi engekho.

Bahlali baseNingizimu Afrika siyazi, futhi siyakuhlonipha ukuthi kunabholi abalwela lelizwe baze banikela ngezimpilo zabo befuna mina nawe sikhululeke ngokugcwele kodwa namhlanje izwe lisehlazweni eliyisimanga.

Siyafisa ukubabonga labo baholi abafana no Oliver Tambo, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, Dorothy Nyembe, Thuli Ndlovu, Nokuthula Mabaso nabanye. Siyazi ukuthi uma bekungathiwa bayavuka kwabalele namhlanje bangadumala bebona izithukuthuku zabo seziyinhlekisa nakwabezizwe.

Sesikhathalele ukuphelezela izintombi nezinsizwa ezimbalwa nazo ezisuke ziphelezele oNgqongqoshe nosoma bhizinisi abambalwa abakhululekile beyosithela ukuthi sikhululekile ezinkundleni zemidlalo. Ngenxa nje yokunikwa isikibha samahhala ne plate lokudla bese sizithela ukuthi yinkululeko leyo.

Siyibonile inhlekelele yezikhukhula ibulala abantu bakithi abahluphekayo emakhaya nasemijondolo ngenxa yezakhiwo esihlala kuzo. Bafele nje ukuthi bayahlupheka. Inhlupheko iyabulala.

Sizothi namhlanje, ngabe siyazikhohlisa futhi neqiniso alikho kithi uma singathi sinezizathu zokugubha usuku lenkululeko. Yingakho sithi namhlanje kumele sizile sibabaze ukuthi aw-hhe, laze lafa elakithi sibhekile.

Namhlanje sizothi inkululeko ayikho kwabampofu. Ngakho ke simema bonke abantu abahluphekile kulelizwe lakithi nabazibona bekhishwe inyum-bazane kulentando yeningi ukuthi basukume babhukule bazibandakanye nomz-abalazo wabahlali ukuze ngokubambisana sakhe iNingizimu Afrika yawo wonke umuntu. Sizibophezele ekutheni sakhane, sicijane, sifundisane, sisekane silwele ubulungiswa, ukulingana nesithunzi. Akumele kwenzeke iphutha sizithole sikulelhlazo esikulo manje emva kweminye iminyaka engamashumi amathathu.

Namhlanje sithi umhlaba, umncebo namandla akwabiwe kuhlomulise wonke umuntu wase Ningizimu Afrika ukuze ngelinye ilanga sigubhe inkululeko yangempela.

UNkulunkulu anibusise.

21 APRIL 2024

Speech · S'bu Zikode

The People's Minimum Demands and Abahlali's position on Election 2024

Announcement read in the UnFreedom Day speech, 21 April 2024

In the 19 years since our movement was founded we have struggled to liberate ourselves from the chains of poverty, indignity and repression. We have organised in our communities, built new communities on occupied land and taken our struggle into the streets, the media, negotiations and the courts. We have built strong relations with radical movements and intellectuals around the world. While our politics has always been grounded in building popular democratic power from below, and working towards building a national movement of communes and a global movement of movements, we have, since 2006, made various kinds of tactical interventions in elections while remaining autonomous from all political parties.

Beginning at our General Assembly on 3 February this year we began a process to enable our members to discuss the question of a tactical response to this year's election. There were three starting points to our engagement around this election, all agreed on, in the General Assembly in February. They were as follows:

The ANC has been assassinating our leaders since 2013. In 2022 we lost three leaders to assassination and a fourth to a police murder. It is therefore imperative that the ANC be given a very strong message that repression will not be tolerated, and preferable that it be removed from power altogether. The new MK party is an off-shoot of the ANC in which some of its worst people and tendencies are present. It has taken some dangerously right-wing positions. It must also be considered as a serious threat to society and to our movement.

We are a socialist organisation committed to building socialism from below via the construction of popular democratic power. However, there is no left party on the ballot and so we cannot vote for the programme of any party

or with any confidence in its allegiance to the people and to progressive principles. It is not possible to vote for many of our key principles, such as the full decommodification of land or the right to recall.

Given the seriousness of the crisis of repression, a crisis that poses an existential threat to our movement, abstentionism is not a viable strategy. It is therefore necessary to make a purely tactical vote against the ANC and MK. No tactical considerations can enable a vote for the DA as it opposes land occupations, puts the commercial value of land before its social value and refuses to condemn the ongoing genocide in Palestine.

Although the imperative to deal a serious blow to the ANC in this election is urgent, and a literal matter of life and death, there are limits to how far we can compromise with a tactical vote. In the past we have called on people to vote against the ANC according to their conscience but there is a possible benefit in voting as a bloc in that whichever party we collectively decide to give our tactical support will know that this support is conditional on accepting some key principles. We are aware, of course, of the risk that any party that we choose to support in this election with the tactical aim of weakening or removing the ANC may hand our votes back to the ANC or MK, to the people who are assassinating us, during coalition negotiations.

The role of the leadership was to facilitate the process of thinking together, to listen very carefully and to hear the views and feelings of Abahlali members towards the election. This process was held in all our communities, and all the different structures of the movement including the Women's League, the Youth League, Council of Chairpersons, Provincial Leadership as well as the monthly General Assemblies. A central part of this process was the formulation of a set of minimum demands that our movement could put to the political parties.

The discussions in the communities revealed that there is no confidence in the electoral process. Our members do not trust government and political parties. They only trust Abahlali who have enabled them to gather and focus their strength and defend their right to exist. They also said that they are tired of donating their power to political parties. They were clear that none of the current political parties represent the interest of Abahlali, or the poor and working class in general.

Our members recognised that it will be difficult to avoid coalition governments at the national and provincial levels. They are worried that Abahlali's

vote can be taken and given to the same parties that we want to remove from power.

This process of thinking together generated a clear demand addressed to the movement rather than to the existing political parties. Our members are clear that while they understand that electoral politics is just one terrain of struggle and that it should never replace or distract from the work of building popular democratic power from below, of building socialism from below, they do want to be able to vote for a left party in the next election. They want the movement to, working with like-minded membership based organisations, begin a process of considering how to build a movement driven political instrument for the people, a political instrument that aims to put the people in power rather than a new set of individuals.

A three-day camp for leaders from all provinces was held from 22 to 24 March in the Valley of a Thousand Hills. At that camp we finalised the People's Minimum Demands. These demands are not a statement of our full political vision or our political praxis. They are a statement of the minimum criteria for us to be able to offer a party our tactical support as we take our struggle against political repression onto the electoral terrain.

The People's Minimum Demands

Well-located urban land must be made available for people to be able to build homes and other community infrastructure, including community gardens. This will require a land audit to make planning effective.

Those who wish to receive government housing and meet a reasonable income criterion should be placed on the housing list. Government housing must be built at scale and with urgency and must be decent and fit for human beings. Transit camps must be rejected as an insult to the dignity of the people. The housing list must be transparent and neither renters nor any other particular group of residents should be excluded from the list.

There must be a serious commitment to affirming and defending the dignity of the people, of all the people including the poor and all vulnerable groups.

There must be a clear and viable plan to provide either decent jobs or a liveable income for all. While youth unemployment is a particularly severe crisis people over 35 must be included in this plan. Informal forms of work should be

respected, supported and, where there is danger and exploitation, regulated to ensure safety and fair labour practices. This must include sex work.

There must be an end to the criminalisation of land occupations which need to be understood as a form of grassroots urban planning. When there are genuine social complications around land use these must be resolved with negotiation and not with state violence.

Existing shack settlements and new occupations must receive collective tenure and the provision of non-commodified access to basic services such as water, electricity, sanitation, road access and refuse collection must be undertaken as an urgent priority.

There should be extensive state support for community gardens including seeds, tools, irrigation and fencing, as well as participatory workshops in agroecological farming methods. The state should also support a system of community-controlled markets for produce to be sold. People receiving grants from the state should be able to use their cards to buy at these markets.

There must be a clear and viable plan to end load shedding that includes commitments to provision for access by the poor, to a responsible transition to socially owned and managed renewable energy and to ensure that workers in the current system are not discarded.

There must be lifelong, free and decolonised education available to all, irrespective of age. Education must include skills for people to be able to find employment and develop their communities as well as forms of education that are simply there for people to develop themselves. Community run creches and schools (along the lines of the Frantz Fanon School in eKhenana) should receive state support if they meet clearly elaborated criteria for democratic management and a social function.

There must be state support for democratically run communes and cooperatives and the tendering system should, wherever possible, transition from supporting private business towards supporting cooperatives.

There needs to be a clear plan to address the crisis in the health care system, which must include employing many more doctors, nurses and other health care workers. The overcrowding of clinics and hospitals must be addressed.

There needs to be a clear plan to address the crisis of violence in society, including violence against woman, as well as other forms of socially damaging behaviour. This must not take the form of escalating the endemic state violence

against the poor but should rather take the form of building a more peaceful, safe and just society.

There needs to be a program to decentralise access to educational opportunities and possibilities for employment to ensure national access, including in rural areas.

Political parties need to have a clear program to develop the intellectual strength and integrity of their leaders, and to do the same for government officials.

Corruption needs to be understood as theft from the people and to be dealt with decisively. After due process any politician shown to be guilty of corruption must be suspended from their political party for a period of five years, after which rehabilitation can be considered if there is genuine acknowledgment of wrong doing. Any official seeking to extract bribes, to sell houses or to only allocate houses, services or any other benefits to members of a particular political party must be swiftly investigated and, after due process overseen by an elected jury from the affected community, dismissed from their position.

There must be a serious commitment to dealing with the environmental crisis from a people centred perspective. This includes effective action to stop the dumping of rubbish in shack settlements.

Participatory democracy – affirmed under the slogan ‘nothing for us without us’ – must be committed to as a clear principle to guide all engagements between the state and the people. This is particularly important at the community level.

There must be clear opposition to the genocide being carried out in Gaza, and a clear commitment to freedom and justice for the Palestinian people, and for all oppressed people everywhere.

There must be a clear rejection of xenophobia, ethnic politics, sexism, discrimination against LGBTQTI+ people and all other attempts to divide and weaken the people.

There must be a clear commitment to oppose all forms of political violence and political repression in South Africa, no matter which person or organisation is suffering political violence or repression. This commitment cannot be limited to empty words and must be backed up with real action including mass mobilisation, media campaigns, legal action, etc. There must be a commitment to work against political violence and repression with all political forces opposed to political violence and repression.

At the national leaders' camp it was resolved that we would:

Invite interested political parties other than the ANC, MK and the DA to the Abahlali General Assembly to be held on 7 April. In this General Assembly we would present the People's Minimum Demands in order for parties to respond to the demands carefully developed by the people through a democratic process as opposed to Abahlali listening to the parties' manifestos. The parties would respond to the people rather than the people responding to the parties. We would then collectively consider their responses before formulating our final position on the election.

Engage in mass mobilisation for the Unfreedom Day Rally today. This mobilisation would include mobilising other progressive membership-based organisations, progressive trade unions and other left organisations willing and able to work with organisations of the poor and working class on the basis of mutual respect.

A public announcement of the final movement position on the election would be made at the Unfreedom Day Rally.

Several political parties came to our General Assembly on 7 April. They sat and listened, responded and engaged. Abahlali were listening carefully and giving marks as they responded and made commitments. At the conclusion of the process one party agreed to commit to the People's Minimum Demands with particular clarity on land, education and Palestine.

Today we are here to announce the result of our collective deliberation involving thousands of people in two months of intense discussions.

Abahlali decided that in the 2024 general election it will support the Economic Freedom Fighters on condition that, after today's announcement, its commits to deliver to the People's demands as agreed at Abahlali's General Assembly. To be clear Abahlali is not joining the EFF or offering it uncritical support. This is a tactical vote.

Abahlali will remain Abahlali, keep its autonomy and remain a people's movement. On 29 May we will vote. On 30 May we will continue the struggle.

I thank you.

24 APRIL 2024

Interview · S'bu Zikode

South Africa's Enduring Unfreedom

Interview by Richard Pithouse, Boston Review, 24 April 2024

Richard Pithouse: Mandela was released from prison on February 11, 1990, suddenly opening up the field of political possibility after a long and exhausting stalemate between the progressive forces, which were largely organized in two groups: the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the trade unions, and the apartheid state. What did Mandela's release mean to you?

S'bu Zikode: I was fourteen years old, and in school. At that time, we were divided. It was the time of the war between [the right-wing Zulu nationalist organization] Inkatha and the UDF. People could easily draw the line between the two sides along a river or a road. Everyone on one side was Inkatha; everyone on the other side was UDF. A lot of people were killed or had their homes burnt down just because they were living on this or that side of the line.

Some people had guns; we young people had sticks. If you turned back from a battle you would be shot. You had to face bullets from the front and the back. Terrible things happened, very painful things. We don't talk about it.

When the news came that Mandela would be released, there was huge excitement, huge celebration among some people. For them, it was the opening of the world. But for others, the real believers in Inkatha, the world was shutting down. There was a fear that democracy meant that the land owned by the Zulus would have to be shared and that traditional leaders would lose their power. Their biggest fear was that if [Inkatha leader] Prince Buthelezi lost the election, Zulu people would be dominated by other nations. To think of freedom at that time was really to think about peace. It was about the end of war, the end of the politic of blood.

RP: What were your hopes for your own life at the time?

SZ: Well, I was still in school. It was not just the people who were poor; the schools were also poor. That in itself is a lesson to children—a lesson that they do not matter. My mother raised my two sisters, my brother, and myself on her

own. When I was eight years old, she had to leave us to go to work for a white family in Estcourt. I remember this moment very vividly. As a child you don't understand the history behind the system that has made some people poor and other people rich. All you know is that your mother is leaving you.

RP: You finished school in 1996, two years after Mandela became president. That was still a time of real optimism for many people.

SZ: I felt the world was changing. I wanted to go to university and become a lawyer, so I was excited when I got a letter of acceptance from the university. But then I had to face the real world. I had to travel to Durban; I needed a place to stay, food, books. Most of all, I needed to pay the university fees. It really stressed me. I felt alone. Luckily, my brother-in-law offered me a place to stay in Durban. When I took the bus to the university from his flat we would pass Kennedy Road [a large shack settlement in Durban].

Even though I had a place to live, I still couldn't find the money for school fees. Then my brother-in-law moved to Johannesburg—meaning that I had no place to stay. It all just got cut. This happened to many Black people. People at home had hopes in me, but I saw myself as a failure. I was thinking more and more about committing suicide. I asked myself why I thought in the first place that I could go to university: I felt that I should have known from the onset that it wasn't for somebody like me. Out of a home and out of money, I moved to Kennedy Road, the settlement I used to pass every day on the bus, and found a job at a petrol station. Accepting that I had been defeated, giving up on my hope of going to the university, and moving to Kennedy Road liberated me from the extreme stress that I was suffering.

RP: This is when you became politically active in Kennedy Road.

SZ: Growing up, I thought that I knew what it was to be poor, but when I got to Kennedy Road, I came to realize that I was not as poor as I thought I was. In that way, setting foot in Kennedy Road was devastating. When a normal person sees children eating worms at the toilet to feed themselves, a child being bitten on the head by a rat, a baby burnt in a fire, or people being brutalized by the police, they want to do something about it. So I got involved in the ANC and was elected as the deputy chairperson of the ward.

But going to the ANC meetings at night really discouraged me. The meetings were dominated by middle-class people, people living in big houses. Meetings could finish at eleven or twelve o'clock at night, and none of the middle-class

people there thought to offer us lifts back to the shacks in their cars. I was carrying a mandate from the people who had elected me in Kennedy Road, but there was no interest in the lives of the poor. The meetings were about positions and power: Who do we put in power? Who do we mobilize against?

In 2004 there was a big meeting about a proposed housing development in Kennedy Road with various government departments. The Kennedy Road ANC branch was not invited. Eventually, we learned why: the meeting opposed the housing development. The government officials at the meeting didn't want us to live with middle-class people. They wanted to take us to human dumping grounds far outside the city, even further out than the townships built under apartheid. After this experience, I left the ANC. At the same time, the Kennedy Road Development Committee [an elected group formed to advocate for the shack settlement] declared 2005 as the year of action.

RP: 2004 was a politically explosive year across the country: people, mostly people living in shacks, started organizing road blockades as a form of protest.

SZ: Yes, I remember when Tebogo Mkhonza was killed when police opened fire at four thousand people blockading a major highway in the Free State. He was seventeen. We saw many protests in the media, but we had no connection to what was happening elsewhere in the country.

Then suddenly in March 2005, without explanation, a small piece of land near Kennedy Road that had been promised to us for housing was put under construction. The people working there told us that it had been bought by a businessman who was going to build a brick factory. On March 19, we blocked the road to demand that the ward councilor come and meet with us to explain what was going on. We wanted to talk, but he sent the police to beat us instead. When the councilor finally arrived in an armored police vehicle, he declared that we were criminals and that we must be arrested. The response to our demand to be included in discussions about our own lives was to be treated as criminals.

After we organized the road blockade, we began to meet with other nearby settlements. On October 6, 2005, at a meeting of leaders from twelve settlements, we decided to form one organization, Abahlali baseMjondolo. Our demands for land and housing in the city were clear, and at least understood even if opposed. But we also insisted on being recognized as people who—like all other

people—think, as people who should be included in discussions and decision-making, as people who should not be treated like children or criminals, as people whose dignity should be respected.

It was clear that the existing forms of politics at that time excluded the poor. Neither the national government nor any of the city councils wanted to collaborate with the poor to resolve the problems of the poor. No political party represented the poor. The trade unions represented their members, not the millions of poor people outside of formal employment. We needed our own politics: a politics by and for the poor. This politics would be a space for the poor to think together, build our power together, and express and advance our interests. For it to work, we needed our politics to make sense to the masses of the country. The thinking was already there in shack settlements and rural villages, the places where poor communities live, but to build power, that thinking had to be organized, focused, and connected.

RP: The response from the ANC and the local government to the emergence of a movement outside of their control was intensely hostile. You were specifically targeted.

SZ: On September 12, 2006, Abahlali deputy president Philani Zungu and I were arrested on our way to speak on a radio station. We had been warned by a senior politician not to speak to the media. I was being beaten by the head of the police station near Kennedy Road. While my head was being banged on the wall, I was constantly asked, Who the hell do I think I am to think I can lead ignorant people, rubbish people, to think that we have a right to live with middle-class people, to be a part of society? He asked me if I thought I was a Jesus Christ that could liberate all those jondolos [shack dwellers].

When you are being beaten, the physical pain is one thing. But it is also an emotional assault. The inner pain, the inner damage—I found it very stressful. There was so much hatred, when all we were asking for is that the dignity of everyone be respected, for us all to be human beings among other human beings. That one was difficult to heal from because it leads to depression. You go off, you go mad.

That night in the cells, I ask myself, “Who the hell am I?” I wonder who is ordering the police to do this. I ask myself if I should continue with the struggle. Then comes the dawn. I haven’t slept. I’m on my own, separated from the people who have asked me to lead, who have given me that responsibility that the police

violated. Suddenly I see myself as worthless, infected, a disaster, a disgrace. I am reduced to weightlessness.

But then in the morning, I was brought to appear in court, and I saw that there were so many people in red shirts [the color of the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement] outside in the corridors. When I came up the stairs into the dock, there were so many. Everyone was quiet, but I felt the power of all the people there. I made the decision then to commit my life to this struggle.

Solidarity must be expressed at a personal level. You need to know that you are not alone. People can collapse when they are alone. You see the end of everything. It causes irreparable damage.

RP: The charges were eventually dropped, and the police were successfully sued for torture. But the repression continued.

SZ: Yes—and it got worse. In 2006, there were national municipal elections. In Abahlali baseMjondolo, we followed the position the LPM [Landless People's Movement] in Johannesburg had taken in 2004, when they said "No Land! No Vote!" and boycotted the election. The LPM were repressed and some of their people were tortured. In 2006, we too declared "No Land! No House! No Vote!" This wasn't just taken as criminal. The politicians spoke as if it were treason. In 2007 we organized a collective march on the Durban mayor, a combined action by all the branches in the different settlements. It was illegally banned. When we decided to march in defiance of the ban, the police attacked us with batons, stun grenades, rubber bullets, and live ammunition. We were treated as not worthy of being human.

RP: The insistence on dignity has always been central to your struggle, and to the struggles of impoverished people around the country, and around the world too.

SZ: A lot of people think that we can only come together around our living conditions. Of course, this is important, and we struggle very hard to improve those conditions. But when we are together, the first thing we must do is recognize the humanity of each and every one of us, because it's only from that position of humanity that we can take our place among other people on this earth. We came to realize why people lie to us and make fake promises to us: it is because in their eyes we are not human enough. It is very deep. So we come together because our humanity is troubled. We come together to develop and defend our humanity, our dignity, to make the world more human. Only after this do questions of living conditions come into being.

For us, the first questions are whether you respect us and how you respect us. Do you engage with us in a respectful way, allow us to speak what we think is right? We want to fully participate in decision-making. We want to participate in development. We want the state and the NGOs to think with us, not for us.

I often talk about the African idea of ubuntu. When I do, I'm not just referring to a concept, but the praxis that demonstrates, builds, and defends collective humanity. It is a broad political spirit of humanism that also appeals to the questions of freedom and liberation. And for us, the political form that humanism must take is socialism—particularly democratic socialism built from below.

RP: In 2008 impoverished people, often encouraged by local elites, began to turn on one another. You had been warning for years that the anger of the poor can go in many directions.

SZ: Migrants from other African countries and Asia were attacked and killed in broad daylight, starting in Johannesburg and then elsewhere across the country. We were able to make sure that there were no attacks in any of the areas where we were strong and to give shelter to people who had fled their homes. But once the urgency of the immediate crisis was over, these attacks presented us with a moment of introspection. We realized that we needed to reflect on the things we said, on the commitments we made, and on the contributions we made to society. We had to be clear that we were not only struggling for ourselves to have better lives but to build a better society for everyone.

When oppressed people feel disrespected, they may try to regain some sense of respect by turning on other oppressed people, aiming to make themselves feel better than other people. Since Abahlali baseMjondolo's founding, we had been talking about dignity for ourselves, but in 2008 we had to affirm that we mean dignity for everyone. We declared that a person is a person wherever they may find themselves, no matter where they were born. There is no real freedom without others being free, without your neighbors being free.

We also saw how xenophobia and ethnic divisions are intentionally used to divide poor people—people who might otherwise feel themselves to be the same—when they pose a danger to the system. From time to time, the system has to remind them that they are not the same, that they must see each other as enemies. The system must make poor people think that they are denying each other opportunities to a flourishing life. We must be divided by language, gender, sexuality. But this hate will keep us all poor. And because this hate always

weakens the poor, it has to be rejected by poor people first. We have to continue to build our consciousness, to connect with struggles around the world, to learn from each other.

RP: The movement's tenacity eventually forced ANC to concede your right to participate in the formal political sphere. But as it did so, it shifted repression toward informal violence: violence backed by the police but not carried out by them. This began with an attack by an armed ANC-aligned mob.

SZ: We were attacked in the Kennedy Road settlement in late September 2009. At the time, we were having a youth camp at the hall in Kennedy Road. We also had a concert in the community hall, and there was a soccer tournament at the sports ground. A lot was happening.

Our leaders and Xhosa-speaking people living in the settlement were attacked by a large group of men. They were armed, and drunk. They were shouting that they were ANC and Zulu and that S'bu Zikode was putting Xhosa-speaking people ahead of Zulu-speaking people. Homes were ransacked and set alight. The attack continued in broad daylight, in front of the police. That same day, very senior ANC politicians and ministers came to Kennedy Road and announced that Abahlali was disbanded. Later, they went to parliament and said that "Kennedy Road has been liberated."

As a result, we had to go underground. We were scattered all over the place. At first we met secretly in a funeral parlor; then we started meeting openly in a park. We had suffered a heavy blow, but our movement had survived the attack. But then the ANC began to use assassinations. On June 26, 2013, they assassinated Nkululeko Gwala, a leader in our movement, in Cato Crest [an area in Durban that includes public housing, suburban housing, and shack settlements].

RP: You gave an electric speech at Nkululeko's funeral that was widely covered in the Zulu media.

SZ: The funeral, held at Nkululeko's home village in Inchanga, was incredibly tense. From the very start, the ANC tried to make it an ANC funeral. Imagine that: they can kill you, and then offer to bury you and pay for your funeral.

James Nxumalo, the ANC mayor at that time, was present, along with other high-profile government people, lots of police, and intelligence. The local ANC councilor spoke first, setting the tone. He implied that this was an ANC funeral, that this village was an ANC home. He said that there were no shacks in the

village, but that people from the shacks were here. He was mocking our poverty. The warning was very clear.

After he spoke, the senior leaders of the movement took me to the side and counseled me not to speak. It was too dangerous. But then the master of ceremonies, appointed by the Gwala family, called me to speak. Nkululeko was beloved by the community. We could not show fear. And anyway, I was fuming, not scared—just really angry at the situation, at the ANC's lies and hypocrisy.

I spoke very diplomatically, saying, very respectfully, that the family needed and deserved to know the truth. I deliberately went against every single thing that the councilor had said. I explained how we knew Nkululeko, how we understood him, and what he meant to the community and the movement. I explained that people in rural communities like this village had been abandoned, just like poor people in the cities, and that Nkululeko had given his life for those people, for the oppressed.

I pointed out how many Abahlali members were there to honor their leader, and that we were there to tell the truth about how he was killed. I explained that Nkululeko was killed for his bravery and honesty. I made it clear that senior ANC politicians had publicly threatened him, and that now there were ANC politicians at the funeral wanting to make it an ANC funeral. Emotions were very high. After my speech, the ANC people, including the mayor, could not proceed to speak. The councilor disappeared. It was clear that the ANC were no longer welcome. Immediately after the speech, my comrades pulled me out and put me in a car to rush me out of the village. They felt I was in danger, that it would not be safe to proceed to the grave. But the rest of our members stayed, and it became an Abahlali funeral.

When you have to speak for people, you have to do justice to the people. You to make sure that you say everything that they would have said. It is not about you. I had to satisfy them without fear for myself. After I spoke I was at peace, confident that I had represented the emotions of our members.

RP: There were also two police killings of Abahlali baseMjondolo members in Cato Crest that same year. A police officer was convicted for one of the killings.

SZ: Yes. First, Nkosinathi Mngomezulu was shot a number of times and seriously wounded by the police during an eviction on September 22, 2013. He really suffered. It took several months for him to die, getting weaker and weaker every day. At the end he was helpless. Just eight days later, on September 30,

Nqobile Nzuzua was killed by the police during a protest against evictions. She was seventeen years old. The police claimed that they were under attack by a vicious mob and had to shoot to save their lives. They spoke as if they were the real victims. The media repeated this as if it were true: they saw no reason to talk to eyewitnesses, to the people who were part of the protest. We were made to look like savages. But when the matter of Nqobile's killing finally went to court, it was shown that she was unarmed and shot from behind, and that there was no mob attack on the police.

RP: And then they assassinated Thuli Ndlovu in 2014, S'bonelo Mpeku in 2017, and S'fiso Ngcobo in 2018—all leaders in the movement. There were others too. In 2016 two ANC councilors were convicted of the murder of Thuli. This seemed to be a turning point in getting the media, human rights organizations, and so on to understand what was happening.

SZ: When poor Black people talk about the repression we face, we are not believed unless the courts, or middle-class people like journalists or academics, confirm the truth of what we are saying. The ANC should be using the power of the people to confront the colonial system that continues to terrorize us and vandalize our humanity. Instead, they are using violence to repress the people so that they can benefit from the system. Some people in the ANC feel that for them to be in charge, for them to be leaders, their power must be felt in a physical way: somebody must feel the pinch; there must be fear. This makes them feel better. It stops them from looking at their emptiness. But fear is not respect. There has to be a new kind of politics, a human form of politics.

RP: You often speak about this kind of politics—becoming human and gaining humanity—as a process.

SZ: The fact that your bones are those of a biological human only means that you have the skeleton of a person. It does not confirm your humanity. You may be a skeleton that is still in the process of building, that still needs ubuntu toward yourself, to others, to nature. A human being is incomplete if it is defined in isolation to others.

There is no emancipatory politics without listening to others. Some people will say it's a skill. But listening is much deeper than that. It's about being human, being human together. It's an acknowledgement, an embrace of others. And it's not just an embrace of others as you see them, but an embrace of how they come

through the world to this moment, their suffering, their hopes, their views, how they breathe, and how they express themselves.

As a leader, you have to listen to people very carefully. You have to learn from them. Every time you listen to another person you have the opportunity to learn from them. Every person is a world on their own. You can't say that you are on the side of the people, that you are with the people, if you don't take them seriously as people with ideas of their own. We build our humanity through listening.

RP: In 2018 you had to go underground again.

SZ: When you know that a decision has been made to have you killed, you have to consider a lot. I had to remember that it was not about me, and that I had the responsibility to protect people around me: my family and other young leaders. But going underground on your own creates a big problem: self-isolation. Sometimes, that felt like a bigger problem than the problem that forced me underground. The need to go underground to stay alive and to keep people around me safe captured me and put me into a different planet. Psychologically and spiritually, I was removed from the earth.

But in October, Abahlali led a huge march on the Durban City Hall in protest against repression. There were thousands of people there, and many other organizations supported the march including street traders, people living in the old workers' hostels, trade unions, and migrant groups. There were simultaneous solidarity actions in other cities: Johannesburg, Cape Town, London and New York. There was a clear and powerful demand to end political repression. The movement, working with our comrades in other organizations and other parts of the world, won the space for me to return, and for some time the assassinations stopped.

RP: In 2022 a number of the leaders of the eKhenana Commune, at the time the most politically developed of the occupations, were put in prison on bogus charges, and three of its leaders—Ayanda Ngila, Nokuthula Mabaso and Lindokuhle Mnguni—were assassinated. In the same year, Siyabonga Manqele was murdered by a masked police officer in the nearby eNkanini occupation.

SZ: Lindokuhle and Ayanda started the commune on occupied land on the grounds that there were no jobs for young people. They were clear about the politics of the stomach: that unless the poor own the means to produce their food, they will remain subjects of those who are in authority. They did so well

growing vegetables and breeding chickens that they began to be able to support the movement with their surplus. The sound system we are using today, for example, was bought for the movement by the commune.

It was amazing to have young people decide that they could live without bosses and build economic and political freedom from a commune. Producing food was just the beginning. There was a communal kitchen where they ate together and made sure that nobody ever went hungry. They had a youth club, a poetry project, which was amazing, and of course the Frantz Fanon Political School, for political education. The Fanon School became an important space for the whole movement, and for other organizations too. People from a number of countries came to learn and to teach, from Swaziland, Ghana, Jamaica, Brazil, the United States and elsewhere.

Lindokuhle was a committed internationalist. The first seeds for the garden came from MST, the landless rural workers' movement in Brazil. eKhenana comrades would travel to Swaziland to be in solidarity with the movement there. They hosted people from around the world. And Lindokuhle was strongly committed to women's equality, to building women's power. He would not entertain reactionary positions in the name of culture. He called that feudalism. He introduced the slogan "Socialism or death" to the movement. Lindokuhle knew he would die. He gave his life for the people, for an idea. In South Africa, the price for land continues to be paid in blood.

Repression is always a lesson. It is meant to tell us to know our place, and that we should have always known our place. It is meant to teach us that there are limits to what you can say, what you can enjoy, who you can talk to, what you can demand, what value you can give to your life and to the lives of those around you. If you make the mistake of thinking that you are a human being and that you can engage others as human beings—well, then violence is inevitable.

RP: The loss of four comrades in 2022 firmed many Abahlali members' resolve to go from organizing outside the ANC toward actively trying to remove the ANC from power. At the same time, the growing strength of the movement generated a sense that while its power should continue to be based and built in the occupations, the state could not be permanently ceded to oppressive forces. There is now considerable pressure from your members to enter electoral politics.

SZ: Any individual elected into power is highly likely be co-opted, to be made to join the system. What we have seen with the ANC is that Black people can

join the electoral system and give it legitimacy for a few years before people see that it has remained the same. It could be the same if poor people take a place in the system. The system is designed for that.

We have to think about how we put the people in power, not individuals. That's the question that we have to be battling with, because any individual is likely to be corrupted and changed by the system. It is now clear that we need to talk about the destruction of the capitalist system so that there can be a real reconstruction of a system that places the people—and the humanity and dignity of all people—at the center. We need a new system with a new relation to the world, to the earth, and all its people.

This will take courage—the courage to cross the line. Everyone dies eventually, but what's the use of being killed slowly while the meaning you have given to your life, the value that you have given it, rots away? If we do not have an honest conversation about healing, about decolonizing the mind, we will continue to live in this violence, in the politic of blood.

1 MAY 2024

Essay · S'bu Zikode

Abahlali baseMjondolo's Elections Choice Comes From No Choice

Published in the Mail & Guardian

Since Abahlali baseMjondolo was founded in 2005 we have struggled to liberate ourselves from impoverishment, indignity and repression. Our struggle has been grounded in our occupations of land. We have moved from the occupations into the streets, the media, the courts and various kinds of negotiations. We have built strong relations with radical movements and intellectuals around the world. While we have always understood that building the power of the oppressed from below is the most important strategy for humanising the world, we have, since the 2006 local elections, made various kinds of tactical interventions in elections while remaining autonomous from all political parties.

Prior to 2014 we called for a boycott of elections in protest against the failures of the ANC, and its repression of our movement, and other poor people's movements such as the Landless Peoples' Movement and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign.

Our leaders began to be assassinated in 2013 and we called for a tactical protest vote for the Democratic Alliance in the 2014 national election to put pressure on the ANC to cease repression. It was effective. There were no more assassinations till 2017. In the 2019 national elections we called for a vote for the Socialist Revolutionary Workers' Party (SRWP). Although it was launched very close to the elections and our own process was rushed we felt that we should offer critical support to a left party.

In 2022, repression reached its worst point. Three of our leaders were assassinated in the eKhenana Commune in Durban. Ayanda Ngila was assassinated on 8 March. Nokuthula Mabaso was assassinated on 5 May. Lindokuhle Mnguni was assassinated on 20 August 2022. Siyabonga Manqele was murdered by a masked police officer in the nearby eNkanini occupation on 11 March.

The previous year Ngila and Mnguni had spent six months in Westville prison after being arrested on bogus charges and denied bail before the charges were dropped. A number of others were also held in Westville prison after being arrested on bogus charges, including our deputy president, Mqapheli Bonono.

A total of 25 people have lost their lives during the course of our struggle. Many have been assassinated and others have lost their lives to violence by the police, the land invasion unit and private security companies.

We are not the only organisation that has faced assassinations and police murders. We cannot forget the assassinations of grassroots activists such as Sikhosiphi Rhadebe, of the Amadiba Crisis Committee, and Fikile Ntshangase from the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation, as well as principled civil servants such as Babita Deokaran. We cannot forget the Marikana massacre or the many people murdered by the police during protests.

At our general assembly on 3 February this year, we began a process to enable our members to discuss the question of a tactical response to this year's election. We began from the understanding that it is imperative that the ANC be given a very strong message that repression will not be tolerated, and preferably that it be removed from power altogether. We agreed that the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party is an off-shoot of the ANC in which some of its worst people and tendencies are present and that it must also be considered as a serious threat to society and to our movement.

It was clear that no party shares our politics of building democratic socialism from the ground up and that we could not vote for any party with any confidence in its allegiance to the oppressed and to progressive principles. We also agreed that because of the seriousness of the crisis of repression, abstention from the elections was not a viable strategy.

In the 2016 local government election we called on people to vote against the ANC according to their conscience. But for these 2024 elections we concluded that there is a possible benefit in voting as a bloc because whichever party we decided to give our tactical support would know that this support is conditional on accepting some key principles. We also agreed that for our vote to have an effect it must go to a party that has enough support to threaten the ANC. We were aware that any party that we chose to support may hand our votes back to the ANC or the MK party — to the people who are assassinating us — during coalition negotiations.

The role of Abahlali's leadership was to facilitate the process of thinking together and to listen very carefully to the views and feelings of members. This process was held in all our communities, and all the different structures of the movement. A central part of this process was the formulation of a set of minimum demands that our movement could use to organise its own thought and to put to the political parties.

Our members were very clear that they do not trust any of the political parties and generated a clear demand addressed to the movement. They want Abahlali to, working with like-minded membership-based organisations, begin a process of considering how to build a political instrument for the people that aims to put the people in power rather than a new set of individuals. This is a major challenge.

A three-day camp for leaders from all provinces was held from 22 to 24 March in the Valley of a Thousand Hills to finalise what we decided to call the People's Minimum Demands and to discuss the difficulties we faced in making a tactical intervention in the 2024 elections. The first part of the discussion was easy, and in fact, exciting. The second was difficult because there were strong criticisms of all the political parties.

At the camp we decided that we would invite interested political parties other than the ANC, MK and the DA to the Abahlali general assembly on 7 April and present the People's Minimum Demands. The parties would respond to the people's demands rather than the people responding to the parties' manifestos. We would then consider their responses before formulating our final position.

Several political parties came to our general assembly. They listened and responded. Our members were giving marks as the parties responded and made commitments. At the conclusion of the process one party agreed to commit to more of the People's Minimum Demands than any other, with particular clarity on three issues that are of the utmost importance to us: land, education and Palestine. That party was the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).

We were very clear that Abahlali is not joining the EFF or offering it uncritical support. Abahlali will keep its autonomy and remain a people's movement. We are merely lending our vote to the EFF as a tactical choice with the primary aim of removing the ANC from power or seriously weakening it because the repression that we have suffered is intolerable. We hope that this strong

message to the ANC will be heard by all other political parties and that when new governments or coalition governments are formed they will be aware that repression will not be tolerated.

Our call to other organisations and to individuals concerned about the crisis of our country is to carefully consider their options and to vote against the ANC according to their conscience and strategic calculations. We are pleased that some membership based organisations have decided to conduct their own democratic process to formulate their own demands and take a position on the election. Some, such as the Amadiba Crisis Committee, have already begun their process of putting their demands to the political parties.

We welcome constructive criticism from comrades who care about our movement and our struggle, have listened to our explanations of our process and reasoning and are willing to try to understand the seriousness of the repression that we have been living through. But we urge them to suggest concrete alternatives for a way forward. Critique without a proposal for an alternative strategy does not open a new path.

Criticism of our position that is only grounded in hostility to the party to which we decided to lend our vote and does not take the severity of the repression we have suffered from the ANC seriously is not helpful. We urge those who are far from our experience of the destruction of our homes, imprisonment, assault, torture, murder, long periods of living underground and the constant awareness that a bullet could come at any time to come and spend some time with us, even for a day, to feel, touch and experience our pain. They are welcome to attend Abahlali funerals when we are killed just for insisting on our dignity. If, after all this, their views remain the same, we hope that they can make a positive proposal for how to use the elections to register our strongest possible rejection of almost 20 years of repression by the ANC.

We remain firm in our commitment to use all available terrains of struggle to oppose repression and to insist that the ANC must be removed from power.

28 JUNE 2024

Talk · Thapelo Mohapi

Everybody Thinks!

Development Studies Association conference, panel organised by the Translocal Learning Network, 28 June 2024

When our movement started in 2005 many of the people who founded the movement insisted that everybody thinks, and that the poor must be given the same right as everyone else to participate in all discussions and decision making affecting their lives and communities, as well as wider issues.

There were two reasons for this. One was that the ruling party and the government thought that its role was to think for poor people. The second was that some NGOs and academics also thought that their role was to think for poor people. This included liberals and the kind of leftists who see their role as giving political direction to the oppressed rather than working with the oppressed on the basis of mutual respect.

It is important to understand that colonialism did not just expropriate land and cattle from African people, and then labour. It also expropriated the right of African people to make decisions about their own lives and communities. Just as we struggle for land to be returned to the people, and to be shared fairly among the people, and just as we struggle for wealth to be restored to the people, and to be shared fairly among the people, we also struggle for the right of all people to be able to participate in all discussions and decision making.

This is why we adopted the slogan ‘Nothing for us without us!’ which was originally developed by the disabled movement in the United Kingdom. This is why we adopted the phrase ‘grassroots urban planning’ from our comrades in the urban movement in Brazil. This is why Ashraf Cassiem, the leader of the militant Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign developed the slogan ‘We are poor not stupid!’.

We insist that the poor must be afforded the opportunity to be part of their own development whether this is autonomous self-organised development from below or development that emerges from engagement between the oppressed and the state and NGOs.

It is often perceived that when you are poor and living in shack settlements, former Bantustans or on white farms, you cannot think about how the future development of your community must take shape. This is often the perception of the Western donors who fund governments and NGOs in Africa. This is seen as a 'realistic' view and the idea that poor people can think and plan for ourselves is dismissed as 'romantic'.

Such thinking leads to development being imposed on communities, sometimes at gun point. Sometimes some people in communities, a small minority, are paid to support the development against the majority who do not support this. This divides communities and leads to tensions and revolts in communities. Sometimes what is called 'development' is actually just more oppression, such as when people are forcibly removed from centrally located shack settlements to human dumping grounds far from the cities, dumping grounds where there are no opportunities for people. All this could be avoided if poor people were taken seriously as people, as people with the same right to participate in discussions and decisions as all other people. Being poor does not mean that your capacity to think for yourself has collapsed. Every human being can think. Being poor means that you don't have money, not that you don't have a mind.

Many communities who have occupied land in our movement have planned their development without the interference of government and NGOs in the community. Autonomy, self-organisation and self-management have achieved some incredible results, radical results.

One example is the eKhenana land occupation in Durban which was developed into a commune. There you can see the results of careful, collaborative grassroots urban planning with well laid out homes as well as a communal garden, a communal poultry project, as well as a Political School that is named after the great revolutionary intellectual Frantz Fanon. A high price was paid for this. Three comrades were assassinated.

No government or NGO official would understand the need to centre development around a political school. This is because the poor are seen as victims who need services to be 'delivered' not as political protagonists who want to change the world from below. For us building communes means building the political power of the poor from below as well as meeting basic material needs.

Not long ago the municipality tried to evict Hlanganani (meaning 'coming together'), one of our occupations in Salt Rock, on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The people in the community resisted the eviction and forced the municipality to listen to them. They refused to be treated as human waste and protested to demand their recognition as human beings. This led to the municipality in KwaDukuza to finally recognising them as people and giving them the dignity that they deserve. Respectful engagement is usually something that must be struggled for.

Today the community are part of the development in their community. They discuss and plan as a community on how the area can be developed. This has made the work of the municipal officials much easier. The development will not only provide housing, it will also provide skills that will create employment opportunities beyond the development. This happens because the community is part of the development.

We have made real progress with both completely autonomous forms of development and forms of development with the state, but in both cases progress is only possible when people insist on the right to think and decide for themselves. In both cases people had to be organised and had to resist the forces of repression before progress could be made.

Often when people refuse to be treated as people who can't think and have no right to think the first response of the state (or NGOs, academics, etc) is to claim that someone else is thinking for them, remoting them from behind, and to criminalise the community or its leaders.

We don't need think tanks to think for us. We don't need people who have never lived in a shack settlement to think for us. We need people who are willing to think with us. For university educated people this requires that they are willing to humble themselves, to understand that they are people among other people. People can learn important skills in universities but these skills need to be brought into conversation with the people, with the organic thinking of the people.

A radical state, NGO or academic should understand the difference between charity provided to victims of history and solidarity with people who are committed to making history, to changing the world. Development should be about popular political empowerment as well as meeting basic material needs.

Everybody thinks!

29 AUGUST 2024

Speech · S'bu Zikode

The Struggle for Services in Shack Settlements in South Africa

IBP Asivikeland Conference, 29 August 2024

Thank you program director, IBP and organisers of the convening, Asivikeland comrades, Comrade Axolile Notywala, SALGA President Mr Stofile, SALGA and municipal officials, and everyone.

I have decided to share the sad story of the late uMama Khuzwayo who was burnt to ashes during the shack fire in Kennedy Road in Durban to emphasise the importance of provision of basic services in shack settlements in South Africa, may her soul rest in peace.

I was still new in the Kennedy Road settlement in 2001 when there was a devastating shack fire. We all ran to assist in putting that fire off. At that time there were still only five communal water stand pipes that served that community of thousands of people, and six pit latrine toilets.

While the flames were too much to handle, the water was fetched from far away. We could not win against the fire and eventually we stopped and watched as the flames went higher and higher and all the worldly goods of the family went into ashes. Unexpectedly a huge sound burst from within the flames. It seemed obvious to me that a gas stove or fridge had burst.

I found that the explosive sound was uMama uKhuzwayo's head being consumed by the fire. When I turned around and spoke to the people next to me, I realised that I was the only person that was experiencing this for the first time. This was a part of shack life that everybody knew well.

People reminded me that uMama uKhuzwayo lived with a disability. One of her legs had been amputated. And so she could not run and escape the fire. I was traumatised and angry for some time.

In the same settlement, baby Mhlengi Khumalo, a one year old, was burnt to death in 2005. Abahlali organised a memorial service to honour baby Mhlengi and to publicly denounce this incident. We began the work of politicising shack

fires, of showing that they are not just random events but a direct result of the social abandonment of the poor, that we were being left to burn. Almost twenty years later this work of politicising shack fires continues.

In November 2008, a four-month-old baby Nkosingiphile Cwera, was taken by a different kind of horror, another kind of horror resulting from the abandonment of the poor. The baby was sleeping with his mom during the broad daylight in summer and it was hot. His mom was woken by the cries of her baby. When she woke up, she saw a big rat biting her baby on the head and right arm. She quickly chased it from the house. Her baby was bleeding on his head and arm. The local clinic was closed over the weekends and the mom had to wait for the clinic to open on Monday. However, the baby passed on the following day, on Saturday. We issued a press statement and the story was widely covered in the media. Abahlali baseKennedy threatened to sue the city of eThekweni. The city rushed to fumigate the whole settlement following the media reports.

There are big rats in the informal settlements. I was astonished to witness a big rat that threatened a cat in Kennedy Road. The cat could not stand the size of the rat and eventually turned away and walked away.

It is not just the big events of poverty such as that of shack fires, floods and collapsing buildings that are catastrophic to human abandonment. Many people do not know that living conditions of people in shack settlements have far reaching health consequences. Poverty kills. Social abandonment is an enemy of the people that we must all confront.

The social abandonment of the poor continues year after year, decade after decade, When money is allocated for us it is often just a way for people who get tenders to become rich. During the Covid crisis the National Department of Human Settlement rolled out about 40 000 water tanks to shack settlements across the country. Many of those tanks were never filled up with water, and many of those that were filled up with water were never refilled. In the M7 settlement in Durban the water tanks were actually destroyed by the municipality's Land Invasion Unit during an eviction. Can you imagine this kind of cruelty from the same people who are supposed to be providing basic services?

We are abandoned by the state when it comes to giving us support and care. But when it comes to destroying our homes and communities, and repressing our struggles, the state is vigorously present. The left arm of the state is absent but its right arm oppresses and represses us.

In the 1980s, during the time of the mass struggle against apartheid, people made deep and wide calls for real transformation. When democracy came those calls were forgotten and all that we were promised was service delivery. Real transformation was reduced to service delivery. Every protest was said to be a service delivery even when it was not, such as, for example, when it was against evictions or corrupt councillors. It was often assumed that it was legitimate for us to demand services but not to demand more than that.

To note that this is not to say that services such as refuse collection, sanitation, water and electricity are not hugely important. They are and we struggle for them and appreciate all solidarity as we struggle for services, including from Asivikelane. The victories that we have won in terms of attaining services, sustaining services and changing policy on service provision are hugely important.

In our movement the struggle for services is part of a wider struggle for land, housing and dignity, for democratisation from below and against the extraction of rent, corruption, repression. Our vision is for communities and cities in which people can flourish. Our settlements need support to develop into nurturing communities. They should be understood as land reform from below, as, when they are carefully planned as our new occupations are, as grassroots urban planning.

We cannot deal with the problems of poverty and how the humanity of the poor is vandalised without dealing with the bigger question of creating a just economy and a democratic politics. Land, wealth and power must be fairly shared. The state should be supporting grassroots democracy and urban planning not criminalising it.

Resolving the crisis produced by the absence of basic service in shack settlements requires a holistic approach grounded in building popular democratic power to achieve participatory planning and management.

We have to reject the constant problem of our poverty becoming an opportunity for elites to be enriched. Services must be understood as a public good, not an opportunity for politically connected people to enrich themselves.

Even our own initiative often becomes an opportunity for people to profit. We have seen instances where residents of the shacks have embarked on cleaning campaigns, and sometimes on projects to develop community safety strategies, and then, suddenly, outside contractors or NGOs are brought in and given money for doing what the community was doing for free.

Technical issues must be addressed with great care. The best experts must be brought in to deal with technical issues. But technical approaches cannot replace the need for popular democratic politics. Technical experts need to work with democratic popular organisations on the basis of mutual respect.

To begin to resolve the crisis of failed service provision many things need to change, such as the development of a sense of shared citizenship and belonging, and community ownership of local state processes.

The idea that residents of shack settlements are not fully human, that we are not human enough to be treated with respect and dignity, to be included in discussions and planning relevant to us needs to be done away with.

The idea that only rich people are real citizens, that poor people do not contribute to society, also needs to be done away with.

The wealthy in Durban North called us “squatters”. Some black journalists, some of whom were raised by struggling single moms, allied themselves with the rich and their hostility to the poor. This needs to change. They call us “squatters” because according to them we do not belong in or near to their communities.

The idea that poor people are troublesome and make unreasonable demands needs to change.

The idea that we are beneath the law and cannot think for ourselves needs to change. The definition of citizens in relation to their socio-economic status is a serious problem that must be confronted.

What has happened to the idea of ubuntu and ubuhlali? Why is there no recognition for all the work that poor people do, including raising the children of the rich, cleaning their homes, doing their washing and guarding their homes and businesses?

The middle classes and the rich in South Africa like to talk about the Constitution. They often don’t seem to understand that when the Constitution talks about rights the rights are not dependent on the socio-economic standards of individuals and communities. Rights are inseparable, interlinked and interdependent. They are for everyone everywhere.

The idea that shack settlements are temporary is a scam because people have lived in many settlements for over 30 years. The number of people living in

shacks is growing and it will continue to grow as a result of mass unemployment. Millions of people are without work and cannot afford to pay for formal housing.

When people do not feel a sense of identity and belonging in wider communities, in cities and in the country, they can fail to take responsibility to look after land and communities. For instance, when we were doing cleaning campaigns in communities some people even said that “asizanga ukuzolungisa iTheku/iGoli/iKapa la. [We have not come to clean the city of Durban/Johannesburg/Cape Town here]. This attitude shows that cities have not been kind to people and therefore people are often not kind to these cities. If they do not feel it is their land, their space, their community, their city, their country they may not want to care for wider society.

Another problem is the misuse of service provision to reward political loyalty and punish autonomy. Denying basic services to shack settlements as a form of punishment should be a criminal offense by law.

We want shack settlements to be recognised as communities of dignity where infrastructure such as road access, storm water drainage, electricity, water and sanitation, serviced sites, etc, are provided via participatory democratic processes. We want the shack settlements to be the places where we can build families and raise our children with love and care. They should be places where we can have economic opportunities, good schools, health care facilities and safe environments to realise our dreams. They must be communities where women are safe, loved and supported. Children must be able to grow in safety and to flourish. The state and wider society should be supporting shack settlements while simultaneously working to end poverty.

Decentralisation

As long as our small towns and rural villages are neglected urbanisation and migration to the cities will continue. There must be massive investment in development and industries in our small towns and rural villages. Women must have access to land. Young people must have opportunities. Decentralization could create economic growth and enhance economic opportunities. Local economic opportunities can enable people to improve their rural homes instead of building urban shacks. Investing in our own homes without having to build other homes in cities could make the burden lighter for urban poor. Of course, though, those who choose to live in urban life should be supported to do so. But right now, people are forced to live in urban life because life in rural areas is often impossible.

Not everyone who lives in a shack settlement is looking for a Breaking New Ground (BNG) house. Not everyone who lives in a shack settlement qualifies for government assistant housing. We also need to keep in the mind that the number of houses being built by the government was never enough but has now plummeted. If things stay as they are most people living in a shack will never get a government house.

We have to struggle to force the government to support us to build houses as well as to make shack settlements more habitable.

When shack settlements were not properly planned at the outset and have not been democratically managed, supporting democratic forms of organisation to plan settlements from below in partnership with the state and NGOs is important. Strategies such as re-blocking, creating fire breaks and space for creches, community halls and gardens are all important.

Service sites must be provided and people who are able to improve their shacks and build their own houses must be supported. All of this must be taken in the interests of the public good and not private profiting by politically connected people. In this way the state resources actually go where they are needed the most. Upgrading shack settlements with the people rather than for the people is an empowering process. Collective security of tenure is very important and in fact urgent for people to be able to invest in their own communities and families.

Communities are being built, movements are being built, ubuntu is being built and yes, solidarity and dignity are being built from below. These processes

must be recognised and supported. Abahlali has been built on a very strong foundation of respect for human life, for families, for all kinds of families, and for community.

The values of ubuhlalism, justice and equality have carried us over the 19 years of Abahlali's existence. Freedom is a place and our struggle is for places of respect, dignity and hope. We struggle to work with people and not for people. We struggle with people and not for people because the poor are the people who matter as people and as citizens. And sometimes we make mistakes together. When we make these mistakes, we rest assured that there cannot be pointing of fingers at the leadership because the mistakes were made with people and not for people. It is often better to be wrong with the people rather than to be right without the people.

In our collective journey we win victories of courage and dignity when progress is made towards sharing land, wealth and power. Land must be restored to the people, and secured and democratically managed by the people who live on it and work it.

I thank you.

24 OCTOBER 2025

Talk · S'bu Zikode

Is the continuous increase of shack settlements a quest for shelter or economic opportunities?

Webinar, 24 October 2025

Thank you, chairperson Mr Mbili, for inviting me to speak here today. The MEC for Transport and Human Settlements, Honourable Mthombeni. My fellow respondents, Prof Lushaba, Dr Ellenson, the Portfolio Committee member Honourable Masiko, Apostle Mpungose, senior government officials present here and all participants of this webinar in KZN and beyond.

After the Prof presented his thought-provoking analysis on the question of what is considered modernity, it got me to think that government must not work for the people but with the people.

Surely, we all agree that no human being in their right senses would, out of their own personal will, choose to live in a shack. Living in a shack is dangerous, stressful, exhausting and undignified. There is a constant risk of fire, floods, and, at times, police harassment and violent evictions. Living in a flimsy home there is a much greater risk of suffering from the violence that is so common in our damaged society. Without drainage, paths and stairs shack life is lived in the mud when the rains come. Without sanitation and rubbish collection it is lived in stench and squalor, among huge rats. It is bitterly cold in winter and unbearably hot in summer. Shack life is precarious and does not allow one to build a home for one's family, for future generations. Everything you work for can be lost in a moment.

When those in authority speak about the millions of people who live in shacks as criminals – as if this is a matter of the 'rule of law' – they ignore the well-known fact of our painful history of colonialism and land dispossession and apartheid that made the majority of people in this country poor. They ignore the fact that, along with the failure to undertake meaningful land reform and other forms of redress, economic policies designed in the interests of capital and the hold that a predatory political class has on the state have not only kept

people poor but made the poor poorer. They ignore the fact that most young people cannot find jobs and will, unless things change, never find jobs. They ignore the fact that the few jobs that do exist are mostly to be found in cities. They ignore the fact that when people can find work it is often casual and so badly paid that it is impossible to afford formal accommodation.

The government's housing programme after apartheid was always inadequate. The RDP houses were tiny and badly built – much worse than the township houses built under apartheid. They were often much further outside the cities than the houses built under apartheid. There was massive corruption in the building and allocation of the houses. Now that programme – as flawed as it was – has more or less collapsed. The number of houses being built has been in rapid decline for years.

The government should be undertaking rapid land reform, including in the cities. They should be engaged in a massive programme of building public housing. They should be investing in young people, investing in rural villages and small towns and taking the unemployment crisis as a crisis. They should be approaching it as if we are at war, at war against the impoverishment, hopelessness and indignity that is crushing so many young people's hopes for their lives.

Instead they choose to criminalise poverty. They choose to send our armed and violent anti-eviction units of various kinds to destroy people's homes. Instead of upgrading shack settlements where they are they choose to force people out of the cities and away from the new nodes of gated wealth outside the cities to human dumping grounds – wastelands that are far from schools, clinics, transport routes and opportunities for work.

Today we are asked to choose between saying that people live in shacks because they need shelter or because they need to be close to economic opportunities. This is a choice from no choice. We must refuse to make this choice. People live in shacks because they need homes and because they need to be close to economic opportunities.

Urbanisation is a global phenomenon. Migration is also a global phenomenon. More than a billion people live in shacks around the world. People migrate to cities for a number of reasons but the main motivation is the search for economic opportunities. If people find decent jobs, they will find a decent apartment or a house to live in. However, when people do not find a decent job or they cannot find any job at all, then they will be compelled to occupy

land and build shacks. For as long as there is no work in rural villages and small towns people will come to the cities to look for work. For as long as they cannot find work or cannot find decent work they will not be able to afford formal accommodation. Under these circumstances they will need shelter and for many people shacks will be the only viable option.

Of course not everyone who lives in a shack comes from the rural areas. Some people move to a shack to escape an abusive relationship. Young people who have grown up in the cities sometimes move into shacks when they need to establish their own homes but cannot afford formal accommodation. For these people moving to a shack is not about being close to work, it is about having their own home.

The government used to confidently say that shack settlements would be eradicated. They first gave the date of 2010 and then they changed it 2014. The reality is that as impoverishment and inequality have worsened over the years, and unemployment has rapidly worsened, the number of people living in shacks has increased. No matter how viciously the poor are criminalised, no matter how often right-wing populist politicians claim that people living in shacks are 'foreigners' and no matter how violently the government responds to shack settlements there will continue to be more and more shacks unless government starts to think and act differently.

If government sends out armed units to destroy people's homes they will just rebuild. If they cannot rebuild on the same land they will rebuild elsewhere. Government must understand that the only way to reduce the number of shacks is to provide land, housing and an economy that can give people a decent livelihood.

There must be massive investment in rural areas and small towns including the construction of infrastructure, institutions of high learning, health care centres, industries, etc. There must be a massive investment in job creation, support for those without decent work and a basic income grant. There must be a people centred economy. There must be an end to the plunder of public budgets by politically connected mafias. There must be massive urban and land reform. There should be subsidised housing for young people coming to cities. Serviced sites and subsidised access to building material should be made available for people who wish to build for themselves. Government needs to build

decent public housing on a mass scale, including housing for single young people.

We cannot continue to allocate land on the basis of private profit. For as long as urban land is commodified those with no money will not be welcome. Land must be allocated on the basis of social need. In rural areas there is, at least, a large amount of land that is allocated outside of the capitalist system via versions of traditional management. We all know the problems that are sometimes present – such as the Ngonyama Trust extracting rent and women being denied access to land – but for many people these systems are more welcoming than the capitalist system in the cities.

The reality is that we live in the most productive economy in human history. There is more than enough wealth in the world to house, feed, clothe and educate everyone. South Africa is not a poor country. We could have made great strides towards ensuring a dignified life for our people – including dignified housing – with the right political vision and integrity.

The only way to ensure that nobody has to live in a shack is to build a world and a country in which land, wealth and power are fairly shared. We have to move beyond capitalism and build a humane economy, an economy that functions in the interests of the people, starting with the worst off, and not private profit. We have to put an end to the gangsterisation of politics and the massive theft of public wealth.

Shack settlements must be seen as communities to be supported, and not as issue of criminality. The government must respond with humility and care, not arrogance and violence.

We cannot continue with the situation in which the rich live in gated communities and the poor live in shacks. There is only one world, only one humanity, and everyone should be able to live in safety and with dignity.

The real problem is inequality. Shacks are just a symptom of this problem. The real solution to this problem is to build a more equal and just world, a more equal and just country and more equal and just cities.

25 OCTOBER 2025

Message · Mqapheli Bonono

Message from Mqapheli Bonono from Rome

Rome, October 2025

Before I left the country, I was quite emotional, questioning myself — do I really have the power to carry all the pain of Abahlali? I thought of all the suffering and the pain that we have been through as a movement, and of all the oppressed people in the entire country; the people of Palestine, the people of Congo, the people of South Sudan that are suffering, the people of the world. And, of course, myself, my own pain as a person and as a leader, who has also gone through some difficult processes — surviving an assassination attempt, being imprisoned.

When I arrived in Rome it was raining — a sign of blessings. We met with the comrades from the other movements at an occupation called Spin Time — where 400 people, including migrants, have occupied a building that used to be owned by the government. There were comrades from all over the world — MST, MTST, movements from Guatemala, from all continents.

We started the two days of intense discussions, where we had to present all the suffering of the oppressed people of the world and put together a document that was presented to the Pope on Thursday. It all came with a lot of emotion and reflection. When I got the opportunity to speak, to present the suffering of Abahlali, I made sure I did not leave out the suffering, that I did justice to it.

When I had to present, we also had faith-based organisations in the room. They like to talk about peace. To me, the question of peace was very difficult — how can you find peace when justice is not being served, especially for people who have been pushed away from having a place on the earth, some respect in this world?

It was very encouraging to listen carefully to the explanation of the vision of Pope Francis when he established this space — a space to recognise and bring closer the leaders of oppressed people, to listen to them. He described the work of the popular movements as the continuation of the work of God.

It was a very moving time when we marched yesterday to St Peter's Square. As we walked in, of course, what comes to your mind is that the Pope will come and pray for you. But it was very powerful when he sat down and listened to us.

We presented the document we had worked on together, and he responded very positively. Some of the things he said were very emotional to me — hearing him affirm that the work we do for housing, land, and dignity is necessary work, work that must be supported by the whole world.

He said that the poor are at the centre of the Gospel, that the church must walk with popular movements, that housing, work and land are sacred rights. He said that we must fight for them, and that he is with us. He said that Jesus has hidden His face in that of the poor.

It was good to hear the Pope commit himself to our fight, to hear him say that he has heard us, and we must not hesitate. He said that he knows that people in the peripheries are, and he wants us to know that he is with us and working with us.

He also said that he is walking with us and relying on us — that we are the ones who can make the beauty of this land, not him. He said he expects us to continue the work we are doing in our respective struggles, and that we must remain humble.

I give credit to the people in the Spin Time occupation, people living there and running their classes and projects there. It was very significant for us to spend time with them.

This morning we will go and pay our respects at Pope Francis's grave.

19 JANUARY 2026

Interview · Mqapheli Bonono

Building the Frantz Fanon School

Interview by Richard Pithouse, Review of African Political Economy, January 2026. An edited excerpt from a longer interview conducted in July 2024.

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.

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.

24 JUNE 2026

Essay · Thapelo Mohapi

‘The amabutho are back’

Published by IOL

I grew up in Bhambayi in Inanda, to the north of Durban.

In 1993 more than two hundred people were killed in political violence between Inkatha and the ANC. In 1990, when I was eight, two friends of my father who were visiting from Lesotho were murdered. My brothers and I saw the bodies. In that same year my family moved me to Matatiele in the Eastern Cape so that I would not be forced into anti-ANC marches.

We were not told that the war between Inkatha and the ANC was about ideological differences. We were told that it was a war between amaZulu and amaXhosa. As Basotho my family lived under constant suspicion. That suspicion never fully went away. In 2015, my cousins from Matatiele were visiting me when the xenophobic attacks that would kill at least seven people and displace thousands began. The police banged on the door of my shack and demanded to see our IDs after hearing us speaking Sesotho. The ANC has often told amaMpondo in Durban that they must ‘go back to the Eastern Cape’.

Many of my comrades in Abahlali baseMjondolo carry the scars of this war that devastated places like Bhambayi, Amawoti and Lindelani, along with parts of Ntuzuma, KwaMashu.

Those of us who lived through those times will not forget the killing, people having to flee their homes and the amabutho armed with pangas, sticks, spears and guns, some homemade from bits of pipe. We will not forget being told to hide under the bed by our parents as children were forced to join Inkatha actions.

That time was supposed to have passed and South Africa was supposed to belong to all who live in it. That goal was achieved in law but never fully in practice. But now the air is full of hate again, the amabutho have been called out of the hostels again, and there are armed men on the streets. Away from the TV cameras that focus on the xenophobic marches in the centre of Durban, and smaller towns like Estcourt, smaller groups of armed men are systematically driving people out of their homes, stealing their property and seizing their

homes and businesses. This is happening across KwaZulu-Natal, and elsewhere in the country.

Once again people live in fear. Once again churches and halls have become refugee camps. In Durban four hundred refugees ended up sleeping out in the open on Che Guevara Road after being forced from their homes. More than a month later no attempt has been made to ensure that they can return to their homes in safety.

More than ten thousand migrants fled to the Sherwood Community Hall in Sydenham after being forced from their homes. Instead of defending them the state is carrying out the programme of the xenophobic mobs via mass deportation.

This is not about 'illegal immigration'.

Documented people who were born in other countries are also being intimidated, beaten and driven from their homes. AmaTsonga and amaMpondo are also at risk. In fact the first person to be killed was a young Tsonga man in Mossel Bay.

We cannot accept the lies of the xenophobic parties and organisations when they say that they are only concerned with enforcing the law. They break the law all the time. They break the law when they demand documents, barricade schools and hospitals, beat people, force them from their homes and seize their property, homes and businesses. Documented people are regularly attacked.

This is about a dangerous form of right-wing politics, sometimes fascist in character, in which vulnerable people are scapegoated for an economic and social crisis created by elites. It is about political parties trying to build their support by targeting vulnerable people. It is about people from dominant ethnic groups trying to show their strength by dominating and sometimes terrorising people from minorities.

The attack on amaTsonga in Mossel Bay was not a mistake. It was a clear warning. First they will come for the migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi. Next they will come for Xitsonga, Tshivenda, siSwati and isiNdebele speaking South Africans. They will come for those who are from Limpopo, Free State, Northern Cape and parts of the Eastern Cape. Ethnic violence always starts with the outsider and ends with the minority at home.

When a politics of scapegoating and attacking the 'outsider' starts it will always move on to new targets. When politicians build power on 'us vs them', the 'us' will always keep shrinking. Hindu fascism in India, the genocide in Rwanda,

the wars in the Congo and ethnic politics in Kenya show us where this politics leads.

We must not be fooled. The poor person who came to Durban from Lusikisiki, Maputo or Harare looking for a better life did not steal our land, deny us housing, make us hungry or create an economy in which most young people will never find work.

It was colonialism and apartheid that made us poor. It was the ANC that kept us poor. It is the Government of National Unity that is trying to pass legislation that would criminalise the struggle for land and make it easier to evict us.

Our real enemies are the capitalists in the boardrooms who keep food prices high, the political gangsters that steal from public budgets, the GNU cabinet that wants to roll back the legal protections that were won after apartheid and all those who are bringing the amabutho back into the streets, driving xenophobic social media campaigns and refusing to act against the mobs driving people from their homes.

Driving out refugees, migrants and people from minority ethnicities will not give us land, jobs, peace, functioning institutions, houses, refuse collection or toilets. It will not restore our dignity. A person who feels powerful because they can be cruel to another person is a broken person, a dangerous person, not a person with dignity.

Xenophobia will only damage us as people and as a society. It will only pave the way to the elections in November with corpses. When a politics that turns us against our neighbours becomes normal we will never have peace. When the family from Malawi have been forced out the mob will move onto the family from Giyani or Bizana.

For as long as we blame our neighbours for our suffering we will never understand the true causes of our suffering or build the forms of political power that will enable us to overcome our suffering. We will keep electing corrupt politicians who will keep stealing from us as they get richer and we get poorer. Xenophobic politics is not just cruel. It is also stupid.

In this crisis many ordinary people are bravely protecting their neighbours. The progressive organisations of the working class and the poor are also holding a principled line. This includes the South African Federation of Trade Unions, led by Zwelinzima Vavi, and Abahlali baseMjondolo which was founded on ubuntu and the principle that every human life matters.

We do not organise against our neighbours based on nationality, language, or name. We organise to unite with our neighbours against poverty, evictions,

and poor service delivery, and for land, housing and dignity for all. We organise ourselves to understand the real causes of our suffering and to build real forms of political power to overcome our suffering. We insist that a person is a person wherever they may find themselves. We insist that a neighbour is a neighbour and a comrade is a comrade wherever they come from.

The notion that if you cannot speak isiZulu you are not South African is wrong, divisive and dangerous. South Africa is a non-racial, and ethnically and linguistically diverse country with more than 22 languages and many ethnicities, all of which have equal rights according to our constitution.

We call on all progressive organisations, trade unions, churches, and every poor person in KwaZulu-Natal and across South Africa, to stand between the amabutho and the migrant, between the mob and the child, between lies and the truth.

The media has a responsibility to take the lives of the marginalised seriously, and to report on all forms of intimidation and violence. They should be editorially committed to the values of peace and justice, to the human rights protected in our constitution. But most media have been on the side of the anti-migrant marches. Some have praised those who lead the marches. Today when they see the crisis resulting from the forced displacement of many thousands of people they often act as if they do not know how this humanitarian crisis began.

In this crisis we must all verify information before we share it. We must defend each other. We must understand that whether we were born in South Africa or elsewhere, and whether we speak isiZulu, isiXhosa or Xitsonga we were all made poor by the same systems of colonialism, capitalism and corrupt nationalist parties. If you allow the panga to fall on the migrant from Malawi or the refugee from the Congo today it will fall on your brother from Giyani and your sister from Lusikisiki tomorrow. The same pangas will do the same work.

We cannot stand by while our humanity perishes. We cannot go back to the politics of ethnic nationalism and the wars between Inkatha and the United Democratic Front, and then the African National Congress, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. We cannot be terrorised by the amabutho again. We might have had to hide under our parents' beds when we were children but now that we are grown men and women we must stand firm and do what is right. If we do not fight for ubuntu we will bury more children.

Unyawo Alunampumulo.