

Abahlali baseMjondolo Replies to Bandile Mdlalose

We first became aware of the article published in *Politikon* under the name of Bandile Mdlalose on the 23rd of December via an email send out from Mdlalose's email address to a very large number of people, including what seems to be, as far as we can tell, our entire mailing list. This email included the *Politikon* article and it made, although by implication, a clear and very serious allegation against our movement. It implied that we were responsible for the murder of a man called Dutch Faku. As *The Daily News* reported the next day there is no dispute about who murdered Faku. He was killed, in a purely criminal attack, while on duty as a security guard. One of his attackers was arrested and the other was shot dead by the police.

We are not aware of any person or organisation having taken this allegation against us seriously. But it was extremely reckless and a clear attempt to defame our movement made without any regard for the truth. According to our understanding the reason why the *Politikon* article was attached to this email was to make Mdlalose seem like a person who had credible things to say about our movement.

Mdlalose was expelled from our movement on the 6th of April 2014 after a duly constituted disciplinary hearing found her guilty of charging membership fees at an inflated price and keeping the money for herself. The disciplinary process was carefully documented. We are not the only grassroots organisation that have felt unable to continue our relationship with Mdlalose. After she was expelled from our movement Mdlalose went on to set up her own organisation with, she told many people, financial backing from Patrick Bond, the Director of the Centre for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The only community of any size to join her new organisation was in the Mandela Complex in Newlands. On the 29th of December last year the residents there issued a statement declaring that they were no longer willing to work with her. They declared that "Bandile has not done any justice to us, she has collected a lot of money from us pretending to be doing something good for us." Their full statement is available online.

After Mdlalose was expelled from our movement she began sending out emails to our entire mailing list, and to a long list of academics, making a series of dishonest and malicious statements about our movement and individuals in our movement. Our lawyers have confirmed that these statements are defamatory and they are currently subject to legal action.

In order to be properly understood these defamatory statements need to be placed in a wider context. In the first email to be sent out to our mailing list following her expulsion Mdlalose explicitly allied herself to Heinrich Bohmke. Bohmke, who last time we heard anything about what job he really does was working as a consultant to the South African Police Services, has produced a series of self-published attacks on our movement over a number of years. The origins of this hostility from Bohmke go back to 2006 when our movement, together with the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, walked out of an NGO controlled meeting hosted by the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Since then Bohmke, along with a number of other people including Devanathan Pather and Khadija Sharief, all linked in various ways to CCS, have issued attacks on us that we consider to be plainly dishonest and malicious. Anyone who reads these attacks will immediately recognise that the same themes and obsessions are present in the emails sent out from Mdlalose's email address and in the article published in her name in *Politikon*. We do not recognise our movement in this article. What we do recognise is the long history of how our movement has been misrepresented by people associated with CCS. We do not think that it is irrelevant that since her expulsion from our movement Mdlalose has been closely associated with CCS.

In the past this defamation from people associated with CCS has been primarily circulated on the Debate email list managed by Patrick Bond. But now similar claims, still untrue and still malicious, have been given the dignity of publication in an academic journal. *Politikon* have informed us that the original version of the Mdlalose article was found to be defamatory and returned by their lawyers. Other lawyers take a different view but even if the published version is no longer defamatory it is certainly still deliberately and maliciously dishonest. And it is being used to try and legitimate serious and potentially dangerous ongoing dishonesty and defamation, as well as a long history of dishonesty and defamation, in a context in which our movement faces serious repression, including assassination.

It is not possible for us to address each of the dishonest statements and implications in the article published under Mdlalose's name in the short space that we have been given. We had a six hour meeting on the 4th of February 2015 to discuss the article and produced fourteen pages of notes on the various dishonest statements made in this article. We have therefore decided to focus on a limited number of issues that seemed to be particularly important. However we wish to state on record that we reject this article in its entirety and see it, as do many others, as part of a much longer and larger project of slander, much of which is clearly racist, going back to 2006.

In this article it is stated that Mdlalose resigned from our movement because she was opposed to the decision taken by our movement to make a tactical vote for the opposition (Democratic Alliance) in KwaZulu-Natal in the 2014 election. However she was expelled from our movement on the 6th of April 2014. The decision to make a tactical vote for the opposition was made on the 1st of May 2014. The process of making this decision only began on the 25th of April 2014 and no one knew what the outcome would be until the 1st of May 2014. On the 10th of July Mdlalose took us to the CCMA and demanded, without success, that she be re-instated to her position. It is therefore simply dishonest to claim that Mdlalose resigned from our movement on a point of principle whereas she was in fact expelled for very serious impropriety relating to membership fees before any decision was taken about the 2014 election and tried, and failed, to be reinstated to her position by the CCMA after that decision was taken.

This article seriously misrepresents the decision to make a tactical vote for the DA. This was a democratic decision that was made by vote after long discussion (the entire process was recorded on video) in two separate meetings. The suggestion that this decision was unilaterally taken by S'bu Zikode is entirely dishonest. Our movement did not join the DA, our members decided, via a democratic process, to make a tactical vote for the DA in the hope that this would put pressure on the ANC to stop the campaign of serious repression against us. Because we did not join the DA this decision did not, as this article claims, go against our constitution. As we have explained it is a simple lie to say that Mdlalose resigned from our movement in protest at this decision. It is also not true that our former spokesperson resigned because of this decision. He was a very strong supporter of this decision and often stated this in writing (Whatsapp). It is true, though, that our former Deputy-President was very unhappy about the decision.

In the article Mdlalose also seems to imply that she joined ABM in 2008, or soon after 2008. In fact she first made contact with AbM in February 2010 when Mazwi Nzimande bought her to an event at the Anglican Cathedral in Durban. It is very important to be clear on the date at which Mdlalose first made contact with our movement because our movement was subject to serious violent repression in 2009 which affected the movement in many ways and changed it in many ways. No one can have any proper understanding of our movement without taking the repression of 2009, as well as the repression of 2013, very seriously.

For instance the article states that “What happened to AbM was that we slowly transformed from a movement into an NGO. Once we operated from the community, but now we began operating out of offices in town.” From 2005 until 2009 the movement had its office in the Kennedy Road shack settlement in Clare Estate. From 2010 we have had an office in central Durban. But to present this as a case of the movement choosing to move away from communities and becoming an NGO without explaining the reason for this shift in where our office is located is deeply dishonest. We were attacked by the ANC, acting with the support of the police, in the Kennedy Road settlement in 2009. People were injured, killed, arrested, detained and tortured. Many of our leaders’ homes were destroyed, there were open death threats against our leaders and our office was ransacked and turned into an ANC office. This attack did serious damage to our movement. Some of our comrades are still traumatised by what happened to them and their families. After this attack many of our leaders were left homeless, some had to go underground and for a while every meeting was held in a different location – a funeral parlour, then the parking lot of the Jesus Dome and so on. In 2010 we received support from the churches to rent offices in town. The decision to re-open our office in town was taken because it was no longer safe for us to have an office in a shack settlement where we had been attacked, and have continued to be attacked since then, with impunity. We moved our office to town for safety. But there are some important advantages to having an office in town. We have more reliable access to electricity (in Kennedy we were often disconnected), better access to the internet and there is no longer a risk that the movement will be seen as being closer to one particular settlement. This is very important in order to maintain unity. But the main advantage to being in town is that it makes our office far more accessible, in terms of transport, to most of our members than it was when it was in Kennedy Road. All of our members can easily get into town and back to their homes. When our office was in Kennedy Road most people would have to travel from their settlements into town before taking a taxi to Kennedy Road. We remain a membership based and democratic organisation. Having an office in town does not make us an NGO.

There is the same disregard for the truth in the various statements in the article about bodyguards. There is a difference between hiring a bodyguard because you want to look like a big man and a movement taking a collective decision that it is necessary to have security in a very dangerous situation. We never had security before 2013. The reason why we started to ensure that we had security at some meetings in certain areas was because death threats were being made against our leaders and our leaders were being assassinated. To leave out this context is a malicious misrepresentation of reality. A movement has no choice but to take security seriously when it faces violent repression.

In the article it is stated that “in 2012, the protests we undertook were less about real anger or real resistance. They became more about impressing funders”. This is not true and we cannot see any logic or truth in this statement. In 2012 we organised some legal protests, as we have always done since 2005, on community driven issues and there were also road blockades in various parts of Durban including KwaNdengezi, Shallcross, KwaMashu, Clare Estate, Puntan’s Hill. There is no funder that we are aware of that is impressed by a road blockade. An organisation that was trying to impress funders would organise around issues like climate change, human rights and freedom of expression. It would also stay very close to the NGOs. We continued to organise autonomously. Our press statements from 2012 are all on our website. They speak for themselves. In 2013 we organised more road blockades than ever before. We also fought a huge struggle in support of the Marikana Land Occupation in Cato Crest. Three people were murdered during this struggle. There is no funder that is looking to fund land occupations.

There is also an implication in this article that our leaders now live in suburbs. The ANC has said the same thing. It is entirely dishonest. All our leaders live in poor and working class black communities.

It is true that some of our leaders have been temporarily accommodated in safe houses, with the support of Amnesty International, when an independent risk assessment has found that their lives are at serious and immediate risk. We make no apologies for this. We make every effort to keep our members safe. After the murders in Cato Crest in 2013 Mdlalose was, at her own request, one of the people who was temporarily housed in this way.

There are various allegations about funding in this article. The ANC has made similar allegations and we have responded to these in some detail. Our response is on our website. In the limited space that we have here we would merely like to note that we have always been completely open about the funding that we do accept and that has never been any suggestion of any impropriety from any of the people that have supported us. We have employed an external bookkeeper and will be audited this year.

It is true that when Mdlalose was a member of our movement three members were paid a modest stipend for full time movement work. We have lost many of our best comrades because they need to make a living and, when we can, offering people a stipend for full time work is an important way of allowing people to remain politically committed without failing in their obligations to their families. It is outrageous that this article notes that S'bu Zikode is paid a stipend as if there is something wrong with this without noting that he was forced out of two jobs by the ANC as a result of his activism and that the decision to pay him a stipend was taken democratically. The article also fails to note that the Secretary General before Mdlalose did not earn a stipend and that the current Secretary General does not earn a stipend but that Mdlalose's first act after she was elected (via a block vote mobilised by her mother) in 2010 was to demand a stipend.

International connections have been very, very important for us in times of repression. They have been of huge help in keeping us safe. Often the media will take a protest against repression at the South African embassy in New York or London far more seriously than a protest in Durban. International connections have also been an important way of sharing ideas. But in this article they are presented as if they are somehow a problem. We have always mandated and rotated comrades tasked with the responsibility of travel and we have always extended the same welcome that we have received to comrades visiting our country. Yet this article, which ignores the fact that Mdlalose travelled internationally as a representative of our movement, describes meeting with comrades in other countries as "the high life" as if it is just a matter of selling out. These trips are not holidays. They are important and often exhausting political work.

Soon after our movement was formed it became clear to us that it was often assumed that we should receive but not give solidarity. We rejected this from the beginning and we have always stuck to the principle that solidarity should be based on equality. When people have supported us when we are facing repression we have done the same for them when they are facing repression. This article is seriously dishonest about these relations. For instance in this article a completely dishonest account is given of how we came to issue a statement in support of the philosophy department at Middlesex. The statement that we issued at the time, which is on our website, clearly explained that we were reciprocating solidarity (invaluable solidarity) that we had already received. This article is equally dishonest about our decision to issue a statement and make a small symbolic protest in solidarity with comrades facing repression in Istanbul. On two occasions our members had travelled to Turkey and we had received consistent solidarity from our Turkish comrades. When we received a call for solidarity from our Turkish comrades we quickly decided to act. The statement that we issued is mostly based on the information that they sent us.

We have always found it interesting that both Bohmke and the ANC have been made very uncomfortable by the fact that we have a website. It is always presented as though having a website is some sort of crime. There is a clear implication in this article that our website is a fraudulent misrepresentation of our movement. This is outrageous. Our website primarily contains our press statements and articles written on our movement in newspapers and other publications. Every press statement that we issue is open to scrutiny by the media, by the ANC and by anyone else. One reason why we have won the respect that we have in the media, and in other spaces, is because we always strive to issue statements that are as factually accurate as is possible. Obviously the process for producing press statements differs according to circumstances but we have always been open about this process, many visiting academics and activists have witnessed it and we are confident that it is democratic. No statement has ever gone out without being approved by the movement. Effective communication with the media has been one of the real strengths of our movement and is vital for protecting us against repression.

The comment in this article about photographs on the website being used to raise money is equally outrageous. We have never once used a photograph in any communication with our funders. The statement about 'juicy quotes' also disturbs us. These so-called 'juicy quotes' are the slogans that we worked out in the early years of movement. What would be very strange would be if a political organisation didn't include its own slogans on its own website.

The claim that we have not had the password for the website is another straightforward lie. We have had constant technical problems with the website. It is often hacked and the password is always changing. But we have always had the passwords. After we shifted the website from Drupal to Wordpress Mdlalose was personally trained on the new system in the office. There were a number of other people present at the time. We have written documentation of the communication of the password to her. Despite having the password and being trained in how to use the new system, Mdlalose, unlike the previous Secretary General, chose not to upload anything on to the website. Like many young people she preferred to make use of our Facebook page which, in fact, is read much more than our website.

We have been very pleased to have technical support with our website. There is nothing strange about this. Most organisation separate the editorial and technical functions on their websites. Nothing has ever gone onto our website without our approval.

This article also claims that we have not been forthright about the size of our membership. The first point to make here is that it is the Secretary General's responsibility to present an audit of the numbers at the AGM. Mdlalose failed to do this. In the absence of a firm figure provided by the Secretary General it is not surprising that different numbers appear from different people at different times. Some of the numbers that appeared in the media have not even come from us. Membership has to be renewed annually, for individuals and branches, but membership and support are not the same thing, and some people take membership and then don't participate in the movement while others don't have a membership card and participate regularly. If you count the number of people living in settlements affiliated to our movement you will get one figure, if you could the people that actively support the movement you will get another figure and if you count the number of people that hold membership cards you will get a different figure. We currently have twenty two branches in good standing in KwaZulu-Natal, and one in Cape Town, and just over 11 000 individual members in good standing.

We are really disturbed at the malicious way in which our current president is misrepresented in this article. It is a simple lie to state that he ever stopped visiting communities. Any member of our

movement and anyone that has visited our movement will immediately recognise this as a malicious lie. There have been constant meetings in communities since 2005, often three mass meetings on a weekend. Everyone knows that his leadership style has always been to facilitate collective decision making and not to make decisions for the movement.

We are equally disturbed at the way that our white comrade is misrepresented in this article. This language of 'outsiders' is not our 'language'. This is the language of Bohmke and CCS. This comrade, who has been under severe attack from people in and around CCS since 2006, is one of us. He has been struggling with us in the shacks since before our movement was launched. Whatever he does in our struggle he does as a comrade with a mandate. We make no apology for our position that the work of the intellectual is with the people in the struggle.

The article claims that things started to go seriously wrong in our 2013 AGM. We didn't have an AGM in 2013. We had to postpone it until 2014 due to the repression in Cato Crest, which included a police murder. There were tensions at this AGM. There were also tensions at the 2010 AGM. In both cases we have given a full account of these tensions. The account given here is not, at all, honest. We have never denied that we have faced some real problems in our movement, particularly in 2010 and in 2014. We have always welcomed an honest discussion of the way forward. But, like anyone else, we do not welcome lies and *Politikon* has published lies under the name of Mdlalose.

We find it very interesting that this article makes the claim that our movement was being used to fight academic battles that "shack-dwellers had no knowledge in and I feel I must add, no interest in". This statement is made in relation to the Middlesex issue where, as we have explained, the movement had a real and urgent interest in sustaining a vitally important relation of solidarity. However it is clear to us that most of this article, published under the name of Mdlalose, as well as a lot of what she has said in various emails, is clearly an attempt to settle academic scores. All of us who have worked closely with Mdlalose know her as a person who never had any interest at all in academic matters. Since her expulsion and her development of a close relationship with CCS the statements issued in her name have shown an obsessive interest in academic matters, an interest that follows, exactly, the long campaign of defamation against our movement by Bohmke and others.

Some of the NGOs are always saying that we don't have political direction as if we don't have brains to think. Our politic and our philosophy comes from our daily lives and it has allowed us to build a real movement that has survived very serious repression. We note that despite all the money that the NGOs have they have never succeeded to build a movement.

According to our understanding what this article is saying, and what the writing from Bohmke and others linked to CCS has always said, is that we should not have a website, we should not be in solidarity with comrades in other countries, we should not have comrades in the university, we should not take our own ideas seriously, we should not engage the media carefully and effectively and we should not take precautions with our security when we are facing assassination. The demand that is being issued here is that we must remain the dark corners to which oppression has assigned us. We must always be people who live without names and ideas, people who never step out from behind a burning tyre, people that can be killed with impunity, while other people speak for us and represent us and travel the world in our name without a mandate. This is the logic of oppression. It is also a racist logic and we reject it without apology.