

Revolutionary Ubuntu:

The shack dwellers and poor people of South Africa

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For more information: <http://abahlali.org>

**Abahlali baseMjondolo will take
The Fight Against the Slums Act
to the Constitutional Court
on 14 May 2009**

[Accessed May 3, 2009 at <http://www.abahlali.org/>]

Everyone in the world is facing a deep economic crisis, and beyond that a crisis of imagination. Few now think of a new wave of struggle that can raise our hopes and aspirations to fight for a society free of all forms of exploitation. This is why we publish this pamphlet.

The wretched of the earth are speaking. The Zapatistas. The colonial workers in Martinique and Guadeloupe. The peasants of Nepal and Bolivia.

What seems clear is that the cutting edge of revolutionary movement today is at that point of greatest exploitation. The neoliberal capitalist forces have led the information revolution of digital technology into a labor replacing free fall that places millions in absolute insecurity. This is not the unemployment of the past with people expecting to go back to work. This unemployment is systemic, permanent. And yet wealth exists, food can be produced, including housing, health care and all the things people need to survive and prosper.

While many continue to be blinded by the quite historical impact of our recent heads of state - namely Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama - the fact of our poverty and continued crisis cannot be ignored except by people in the middle classes and those who are directly benefiting from these apparent political victories.

We look for movements that can grab the imagination for a better life for those most in need - the homeless, the poor without health care, the ones victimized by police brutality. Every spark deserves our attention, every possibility can clarify the road to freedom. This is why we publish this pamphlet.

This is the new movement we have been waiting for, a post-apartheid movement for social revolution. We need a post civil rights movement in the US to rebuild our fight for real democracy and social transformation. We can learn from them.

Read this material. Support their struggle. Organize and fight where you are.

*Abdul Alkalimat
May 3, 2009*

April 7, 2009 / An Open Letter from the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign in South Africa to US Activists

[Accessed May 3, 2009 at <http://abahlali.org/node/4956>]

Submitted by Abahlali_3 on Thu, 2009-04-09 12:33. [evictions](#) | [open letter](#) | [solidarity](#) | [The Nation](#) | [Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign](#)

http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090420/western_cape

April 7, 2009
The Nation

To: All poor Americans and their communities in resistance

The privatization of land—a public resource for all that has now become a false commodity—was the original sin, the original cause of this financial crisis. With the privatization of land comes the dispossession of people from their land which was held in common by communities. With the privatization of land comes the privatization of everything else, because once land can be bought and sold, almost anything else can eventually be bought and sold.

As the poor of South Africa, we know this because we live it. Colonialism and apartheid dispossessed us of our land and gave it to whites to be bought and sold for profit. When apartheid as a systematic racial instrument ended in 1994, we did not get our land back. Some blacks are now able to own land as long as they have the money to do so. But as the poor living in council homes, renting flats or living in the shacks, we became even more vulnerable to the property market.

It is chilling to hear many people today speak with nostalgia about how it was better during apartheid—as if it was not apartheid that stole their land in the first place. But, in an obscure way, it makes sense. Back then in the cities there was less competition for land and housing. Because many of us were kept in the bantustans by a combination of force and economic compulsion (such as subsidized rural factories), the informal settlements in the cities were smaller and land less scarce.

But in the new South Africa (what some call post-apartheid South Africa and others call neoliberal South Africa), the elite have decided it is every man—or woman or multinational company—for him or herself. And thus, the poor end up fighting with the rich as well as with themselves. The elite use their wealth and their connections to all South African political parties in the pursuit of profit. There is very little regulation of this, and where there is regulation, corrupt and authoritarian government officials get around it in a heartbeat. People say that we have the best constitution in the world—but what kind of constitution enshrines the pursuit of

profit above anything else? They claim it was written for us. That may be. But it obviously was not written by us—the poor.

So, the recent realization that there is a financial crisis in the US (we think the crisis has been there a long time, but was hidden by economists) reminds us of where we ourselves stand. While our neoliberal government has touted growth and low inflation figures as proof of the health of our country, 40 percent unemployment has remained. While Mandela and Mbeki were in power and the economy grew, poor South Africans had their homes stolen right from under them. For our entire lives, we have been living in a depression, and at the center of this crisis is land and housing.

As the poor, we gave the African National Congress government five years to at least make some inroads towards redistribution. But instead, the land and housing crisis has gotten worse, inequality greater, and we are more vulnerable than ever.

So, in 1999, 2000 and 2001, farms, townships, ghettos and shack settlements all across South Africa erupted against evictions, water cutoffs, electricity cutoffs and the like. We have been fighting for small things and small issues, but our communities are also fighting two larger battles.

The first is embodied in the declaration we make to the outside world: We may be poor but we are not stupid! We may be poor, but we can still think! Nothing for us without us! Talk to us, not about us! We are fighting for democracy. The right to be heard and the right to be in control of our own communities and our own society. This means that government officials and political parties should stop telling us what we want. We know what we want. This means that NGOs and development “experts” should stop workshoping us on “world-renowned” solutions at the expense of our own homegrown knowledge. This means we refuse to be a “stakeholder” and have our voices managed and diminished by those who count.

In the 2004 national elections and again in this year’s elections, we have declared, “No Land! No House! No Vote!” This is not because we are against democracy but because we are against voting for elites and for politicians who promise us the whole world every five years and, when they get elected, steal the little we have for themselves. Elections are a chance for those in power to consolidate it. We believe this is not only a problem of corruption, but also a structural problem that gives individuals and political parties the authority to make decisions for us. We reject that and we reject voting for it.

Second, while our actions may seem like a demand for welfare couched in a demand for houses, social grants and water, they are actually a demand to end the commodification of things that cannot be commodified: land, labour and money. We take action to get land and houses and also to prevent banks from stealing our land and houses. When a family gets evicted and has nowhere else to go, we put them back inside. (In Gugulethu last year we put 146 out of 150 families back in their homes).

When government cuts off our electricity, we put it back on. In 2001, we were able to get the City of Cape Town to declare a two-month moratorium on evictions. We break the government's law in order not to break our own (moral) laws. We oppose the authorities because we never gave them the authority to steal, buy and sell our land in the first place.

Combined these are battles for a new emancipatory structure where we are not stakeholders but people; where land is for everyone and where resources are shared rather than fought over.

This anti-eviction movement you are waging has the potential to help build a new kind of liberative politics outside of the political parties. We have found that these politics must be about the issues (including land and housing). It must not be about personalisation of the struggle. No politician or political party can or will fight the struggle for you. As a hero of your past once stated: power concedes nothing without a demand. Being in the struggle for over nine years, we have learned the following:

- Beware of all those in power—even those who seem like they are on your side.
- Beware of money, especially NGO money, which seeks to pacify and prevent direct action.
- Beware of media, even alternative media written by the middle class on behalf of the poor. Create your own media.
- Beware of leaders, even your own. No one can lead without you. Leaders are like forks and knives. They are the tools of the community and exist to be led by the communities.

When you build your “Take Back Our Land! Take Back Our Houses!” movement, build from below. Build democratically. Build alternative and autonomous ways of living within your community while fighting for what is yours. Build your own school of thought.

Make sure poor communities control their own movements because, as we say, no one can lead without us. Make sure you break the government's laws when necessary, but never break your own laws which you set for yourselves.

Most important of all, do not forget you have much to teach us as well. We all have much to learn from one another.

Amandla Ngawethu! Power to the Poor People!

The Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign
South Africa

November 2005 / We are the Third Force' by S'bu Zikode

[Accessed May 3, 2009 at <http://www.abahlali.org/node/17>]

Submitted by abahlali on Thu, 2006-10-19 05:54. [introduction](#) | [S'bu Zikode](#) | [third force](#)

This journalistic intervention by S'bu Zikode, the chairperson of Abahlali baseMjondolo, caused a national sensation when it was first published in November 2005 and then rapidly translated into Afrikaans, Xhosa and Zulu and widely republished in newspapers and popular magazines. It is quite probably the most widely republished piece of journalism in post-apartheid South Africa. The term Third Force became part of the national imagination in South Africa after it was used to describe the apartheid security agents who offered covert military support to Zulu nationalists waging a war against the ANC in last years of apartheid. It is highly pejorative, implies covert white manipulation towards evil ends and, in its contemporary avatar, assumes an absolute inability for poor black people to exercise historical agency on their own. From the road blockade that birthed this movement until now numerous, and very often contradictory variations of the Third Force argument have been deployed by the state in an increasingly neurotic and at times outrightly hysterical mode. It is an unfortunate fact that a section of the NGO left, a section that chooses not to attend the meetings of, or to in any way engage in serious discussions with the people it assumes a natural right to lead, is increasingly also resorting to the racism of the white agitator thesis to try and explain away the fact that a large movement of the militant poor is uncompromisingly asserting the right to speak for and to represent itself. It seems that everyone in the business of speaking for the poor, in the state or on the left, is equally disturbed by the assumption by the poor of the right to speak and act for themselves. In this article Zikode offers a startling and now classic response to claims that the Third Force is behind the mass mobilisations organised by Abahlali baseMjondolo.

You can find a recent example of a Third Force type rant from the office of the Provincial Minister of Housing [here](#).

The Third Force

by S'bu Zikode

The shack dwellers' movement that has given hope to thousands of people in Durban is always being accused of being part of the Third Force. In newspapers and in all kinds of meetings this is said over and over again. They even waste money investigating the Third Force. We need to address this question of the Third Force so that people don't become confused.

I must warn those comrades, government officials, politicians and intellectuals who speak about the Third Force that they have no idea what they are talking about. They are too high to really feel what we feel. They always want to talk for us and about us but they must allow us to talk about our lives and our struggles.

We need to get things clear. There definitely is a Third Force. The question is what is it and who is part of the Third Force? Well, I am Third Force myself. The Third Force is all the pain and the suffering that the poor are subjected to every second in our lives. The shack dwellers have many things to say about the Third Force. It is time for us to speak out and to say this is who we are, this is where we are and this how we live. The life that we are living makes our communities the Third Force. Most of us are not working and have to spend all day struggling for small money. AIDS is worse in the shack settlements than anywhere else. Without proper houses, water, electricity, refuse removal and toilets all kinds of diseases breed. The causes are clearly visible and every Dick, Tom and Harry can understand. Our bodies itch every day because of the insects. If it is raining everything is wet – blankets and floors. If it is hot the mosquitoes and flies are always there. There is no holiday in the shacks. When the evening comes – it is always a challenge. The night is supposed to be for relaxing and getting rest. But it doesn't happen like that in the jondolos. People stay awake worrying about their lives. You must see how big the rats are that will run across the small babies in the night. You must see how people have to sleep under the bridges when it rains because their floors are so wet. The rain comes right inside people's houses. Some people just stand up all night.

But poverty is not just suffering. It threatens us with death every day. We have seen how dangerous being poor is. In the Kennedy Road settlement we have seen how Mhlengi Khumalo, a one year old child, died in a shack fire last month. Seven others have died in fires since the eThekweni Metro decided to stop providing electricity to informal settlements. There are many Mhlangis all over our country. Poverty even threatens people in flats. In Bayview, in Chatsworth, a woman died of hunger earlier this year – she was fearing to tell the neighbours that she had no food and she died, alone.

Those in power are blind to our suffering. This is because they have not seen what we see, they have not felt what we are feeling every second, every day. My appeal is that leaders who are concerned about peoples' lives must come and stay at least one week in the jondolos. They must feel the mud. They must share 6 toilets with 6 000 people. They must dispose of their own refuse while living next to the dump. They must come with us while we look for work. They must chase away the rats and keep the children from knocking the candles. They must care for the sick when there are long queues for the tap. They must have a turn to explain to the children why they can't attend the Technical College down the hill. They must be there when we bury our children who have passed on in the fires, from diarrhoea or AIDS.

For us the most important struggle is to be recognised as human beings. During the struggle prior to 1994 there were only two levels, two classes – the rich and the poor. Now after the election there are three classes – the poor, the middle class and the rich. The poor have been isolated from the middle class. We are becoming more poor and the rest are becoming more rich. We are on our own. We are completely on our own.

Our President Mbeki speaks politics – our Premier Ndebele, and Shilowa in Gauteng and Rasool in the Western Cape, our Mayor Mlaba and mayors all over the country speak politics. But who will speak about the genuine issues that affect the people every day – water, electricity,

education, land, housing? We thought local government would minimise politics and focus on what people need but it all becomes politics.

We discovered that our municipality does not listen to us when we speak to them in Zulu. We tried English. Now we realise that they won't understand Xhosa or Sotho either. The only language that they understand is when we put thousands of people on the street. We have seen the results of this and we have been encouraged. It works very well. It is the only tool that we have to emancipate our people. Why should we stop it?

We have matured in our suffering. We had a programme to find a way forward. Our programme was to continue with the peaceful negotiations with the authorities that first started ten years ago. But our first plan was undermined. We were lied to. We had to come up with an alternative plan.

The 16th of February 2005 was the dawn of our struggle. On that day the Kennedy Road committee had a very successful meeting with the chair of the housing portfolio of the executive committee of the municipality, the director of housing and the ward councillor. They all promised us the vacant land on the Clare Estate for housing. The land on Elf Road was one of the identified areas. But then we were betrayed by the most trusted people in our city. Just one month later, without any warning or explanation, bulldozers began digging the land. People were excited. They went to see what was happening and were shocked to be told that a brick factory was being built there. More people went down to see. There were so many of us that we were blocking the road. The man building the factory called the police and our local councillor, a man put into power by our votes and holding our trust and hopes. The councillor told the police "Arrest these people they are criminals." The police beat us, their dogs bit us and they arrested 14 of us. We asked what happened to the promised land. We were told "Who the hell are you people to demand this land?" This betrayal mobilised the people. The people who betrayed us are responsible for this movement. Those people are the second force.

Our movement started with 14 arrests – we called them the 14 heroes. Now we have 14 settlements united together as abahlali base mJondolo [shack dwellers]. Each settlement meets once a week and the leaders of all the settlements meet once a week. We are prepared to talk but if that doesn't work we are prepared to use our strength. We will do what ever it costs us to get what we need to live safely.

We have learnt from our experience that when you want to achieve what you want, when you want to achieve what is legitimate by peaceful negotiations, by humbleness, by respecting those in authority your plea becomes criminal. You will be deceived for more than ten years, you will be fooled and undermined. This is why we have resorted to the streets. When we stand there in our thousands we are taken seriously.

The struggle that started in Kennedy Road was the beginning of a new era. We are aware of the strategies that the police are coming with to demoralise and threaten the poor. We don't mind them building the jails for us and hiring more security if they are not prepared to listen to what

we are saying. It is important for every shack dwellers to know that we are aware of what is happening in Alexander in Johannesburg, in P.E., in Cape Town. We know that our struggle is not by itself. We have sent our solidarity. We will not rest in peace until there is justice for the poor – not only in Kennedy Road there are many Kennedy Roads, many Mhlengis, many poor voices that are not heard and not understood. But we have discovered the language that works. We will stick with it. The victims have spoken. We have said enough is enough.

It must be clear that this is not a political game. This movement is a kind of social tool by which the community hopes to get quicker results. This has nothing to do with politics or parties. Our members are part of every political organisation that you may think of. This is a non political movement. It will finish its job when land and housing, electricity and basic services have been won and poverty eliminated. It is enough for us to be united until our people have achieved what is wanted – which is basic. But until that is materialised we will never stop.

The community has realised that voting for parties has not brought any change to us – especially at the level of local government elections. We can see some important changes at national level but at local level who ever wins the elections will be challenged by us. We have been betrayed by our own elected councillor. We have decided not to vote. The campaign that has begun – ‘No Land, No House, No Vote’, is a campaign that has been agreed upon in all 14 settlements.

We are driven by the Third Force, the suffering of the poor. Our betrayers are the Second Force. The First Force was our struggle against apartheid. The Third Force will stop when the Fourth Force comes. The Fourth Force is land, housing, water, electricity, health care, education and work. We are only asking what is basic – not what is luxurious. This is the struggle of the poor. The time has come for the poor to show themselves that we can be poor in life but not in mind.

For us time has been a very good teacher. People have realised so many things. We have learnt from the past – we have suffered alone. That pain and suffering has taught us a lot. We have begun to realise that we are not supposed to be living under these conditions. There has been a dawn of democracy for the poor. No one else would have told us – neither our elected leaders nor any officials would have told us what we are entitled to. Even the Freedom Charter is only good in theory. It has nothing to do with the ordinary lives of poor. It doesn't help us. It is the thinking of the masses of the people that matters. We have noted that our country is rich. More airports are being built, there are more developments at the Point water front, more stadiums are being renovated, more money is floating around, even being lent to Mugabe. But when you ask for what is basic you are told that there is no money. It is clear that there is no money for the poor. The money is for the rich. We have come to the decision of saying ‘enough is enough.’ We all agree that something must be done.

S'bu Zikode is the elected Chairperson of the Abahlali baseMjondolo [Shack dwellers] movement which currently includes 14 settlements in Durban and will march on Mayor Obed Mlaba on 14 November.

June 21, 2007 / Eliminate the Slums Act - Original press statement and digital archive

[Accessed May 3, 2009 from <http://abahlali.org/node/1629>]

Submitted by Abahlali_3 on Thu, 2007-06-21 12:12. Abahlali baseMjondolo | press_update

Scroll down for a full archive of all Slums Bill/Act documents including the text of the Bill, comments and submissions against the Bill and an archive of media articles on the Bill. New documents are being added here regularly. If you are only looking for the legal documents from the Abahlali case against the Slums Act click [here](#).

Click [here](#) for comments by people who successfully resisted eviction in [Motala Heights](#) and people whose lives were smashed by eviction in [Juba Place](#) in December 2006.



Durban High Court, 6 November 2008

Abahlali baseMjondolo Press Statement Thursday, 21 June 2007

Operation Murambatsvina comes to KZN: The Notorious Elimination & Prevention of Re-emergence of Slums Bill

Today the KwaZulu-Natal Elimination & Prevention of Re-emergence of Slums Bill will be tabled in the provincial parliament. Abahlali baseMjondolo have discussed this Bill very carefully in many meetings. We have heard Housing MEC Mike Mabuyakulu say that we must not worry because it is aimed at slumlords and shack farming. We have heard Ranjith Purshotum from the Legal Resources Centre say that “Instead of saying that people will be evicted from slums after permanent accommodation is secured, we have a situation where people are being removed from a slum, and sent to another slum. Only this time it is a government-approved slum and is called a transit area. This is the twisted logic of the drafters of the legislation”. We have heard Marie Huchzermeyer from Wits University say that this Bill uses the language of apartheid, is anti-poor and is in direct contradiction with the national housing policy Breaking New Ground. Lawyers have told us that this Bill is unconstitutional.

It is very clear to us that this Bill is an attempt to mount a legal attack on the poor. Already the poor, shack dwellers and street traders, are under illegal and violent attack by Municipalities. This Bill is an attempt to legalize the attacks on the poor. We know about Operation Murambatsvina. Last year one of our members visited Harare and last week we hosted two people from Harare. This Bill is an attempt to legalize a KZN Operation Murambatsvina before the World Cup in 2010. We will fight it all the way.

1. AIM OF THE BILL

The Bill says that its main aims are to:

- Eliminate 'slums' in KwaZulu-Natal
- Prevent new 'slums' from developing
- Upgrade and control existing 'slums'
- Monitor the performance of departments and municipalities in the elimination of 'slums' and the prevention of new 'slums' from developing.

It has detailed plans to make sure that all of this really happens. The Bill also says that it aims to 'improve the living conditions of communities' but it has no detailed plans to make sure that this really happens. It is therefore clear that its real purpose is to get rid of 'slums' rather than to improve the conditions in which people live. Mabuyakulu says that we shouldn't worry because the real targets are slum lords and shack farming but this is not what the Bill says and, anyway, there are no slum lords in Abahlali settlements. Abahlali members have been to Nairobi. We have seen how the slum lords rule the Nairobi settlements and we are strongly against slum lordism. But we do not live in Nairobi. All Abahlali settlements are democratic communities and many other settlements in KZN are also not run by slum lords.

The Bill does not aim to:

- Force local and provincial government to deal with the conditions that force people to leave their homes and move to shack settlements
- Force local and provincial government to immediately provide basic services to shack

settlements like toilets, electricity, water, drainage, paths and speed bumps while they wait for upgrades or relocations

- Force local and provincial government to follow the laws that prevent evictions without a court order, the laws that prevent people from being made homeless in an eviction or to follow the Breaking New Ground Policy that aims to upgrade settlements in situ (where people are already living) instead of relocating people so far from work and schools that they have to leave their low cost houses and come straight back to shacks.
- Force local and provincial government to make their plans for shack dwellers with shack dwellers to avoid the bad planning that undermines development (such as relocating people so far away from work that they have to move back to shacks)

We do not need this Bill. The first thing that we need is for government (local, provincial and national) to begin to follow the existing laws and polices that protect against evictions, forced relocations and which recommend in situ upgrades instead of relocations. After that we need laws that break the power that the very rich have over land in the cities and we need laws to compel municipalities to provide services to shack settlements while people wait for houses to be built.

This Bill is not for shack dwellers. It is to protect the rich, by protecting their property prices.

2. DEFINITION OF IMIJONDOLO

In the Bill the word 'slum' is defined as an overcrowded piece of land or building where poor people live and where there is poor or no infrastructure or toilets.

The Bill uses the word 'slum' in a way that makes it sound like the places where poor people live are a problem that must be cleared away because there is something wrong with poor people. But it does not admit that the poor have been made poor but the same history of theft and exploitation that made the rich to be rich and it does not admit that places where poor people live often lack infrastructure and toilets because of the failure of landlords or the government to provide these things. The solution to the fact that we often don't have toilets in our communities is to provide toilets where we live and not to destroy our communities and move us out of the city. In this Bill the word 'slum' is used to make it sound like the poor and the places where they live are the problem rather than the rich and the way in which they have made the poor to be poor and to be kept poor by a lack of development.

In America black community organizations have opposed the use of the word 'slum' to describe their communities because they say it makes it sound like there is something wrong with them and their places rather than the system that makes them poor and fails to develop their places. They also say that once a place is called a 'slum' it is easy to for the rich and governments to say that it must be 'cleared' or 'eliminated' but if a place is called a community then it is easier to say that it must be supported and developed.

There is also a problem with calling imijondolo 'informal settlements' because once a place is called 'informal' it is easy for people to say that it shouldn't get any of the 'formal' services that people need for a proper life like electricity, toilets, refuse collection and so on. But many of us have lived our whole lives in 'informal settlements'. We can't wait until we live in 'formal' houses to get electricity to stop the fires, water, toilets, drainage, refuse collection and so on. We are living our lives now. We can't wait to start living only when and if the government puts us in a 'formal' one roomed 'house' far out of town.

And we don't like the word 'eliminate'. This is a word that is violent and threatening, not respectful and caring. Our communities should be nurtured, not eliminated.

The people who live in the imijondolo must decide for themselves what they want their communities to be called. We must be allowed to define ourselves and to speak for ourselves.

3. SUPPORTING THE RICH AGAINST THE POOR

- The Bill makes it criminal to occupy a building or land without permission from the owner of the building or the land.
- It forces municipalities to force landowners to evict people on their land (or in their buildings).
- It forces municipalities to seek evictions if landowners fail to do so.
- It forces municipalities to make a plan to eliminate all the 'slums' in its area within six months of this Bill becoming law.
- It forces municipalities to give an annual report on its progress towards eliminating all 'slums'.
- It forces the provincial Department of Housing to closely watch Municipalities and to support them to make sure that they evict people from land that they have occupied.
- It forces the Provincial Department of Housing to support 'any project adopted by a municipality' to 'relocate' people from imijondolo.
- It says that Municipalities may evict people when evictions are in the public interest.
- It forces landowners to protect their land against the poor with fences and security guards. Landowners who do not protect their land against the poor will be guilty of a criminal offence.
- It forces landowners to evict people from their land.

This Bill does not provide any protection for people who have been made poor by the same history and economy that made the rich to be rich and who have decided to occupy land or buildings that are owned by the rich but are not being used by them. In many countries the poor have a legal right to use vacant land or buildings that are owned by the rich but are not being used by them. It is like this in Turkey. There is no reason why South Africa can not also give this right to the poor.

The need of the very poor for housing in the cities near work and education should come before the needs of the very rich to have their property prices protected.

4. TRANSIT AREAS

The Bill allows Municipalities to buy or take land to accommodate people that have been evicted while they are waiting for new developments. These are called 'transit areas'. The Bill does not give any guaranties as to where these 'transit areas' will be located, what services will be provided there, if communities will be kept together or broken up when people are taken to these places or how long they will have to live in these places.

We know that all through history and in many countries governments have put their political opponents, the very poor, people who were seen as ethnically, cultural and racially different, and people without I.D. books in camps. These camps are always supposed to be temporary – a 'transit' between one place and another. But very often these camps have become places of long and terrible suffering. That is why in the Mail & Guardian it was written that this Bill reminds people of Nazi Germany. We know that in India shackdwellers who were taken to transit camps in the 1960s are still there now.

5. EXPROPRIATION OF LAND

The Bill gives Municipalities the right to expropriate land. This means that they have the right to take land from landowners. This could be a very good thing for the poor if land was taken in the cities so that the poor could live safely and legally next to work, schools and clinics. But the Bill says nothing about which land should be taken. It only says that land can be taken to set up a 'transit area' or for people 'removed or evicted from a slum'. Therefore it seems that the right to expropriate land will most be likely be used to evict the poor from the cities and to dump them in rural areas and not to defend their right to live in the cities against the interests of very rich land speculators and developers. Already shack dwellers are being taken out of Durban and dumped in 'formal' low cost houses in places like Park Gate. There is no guarantee that this will not continue.

6. CRIMINALISING THE POOR

This Bill makes any one who tries to stop an eviction a criminal who can be fined R20 000 or sent to prison for 5 years. Any normal person would try to stop an eviction. Which mother would stand by while her home and community is destroyed? If this law is passed it will make us all criminals. But this law says nothing about stopping the illegal and unconstitutional evictions that are perpetrated against shackdwellers all the time by the eThekweni Municipality. The Municipality breaks the law every time that it evicts us without a court order and every time it leaves people homeless but Municipal officials are never arrested. If the laws that exist now are not used fairly we have no guarantee that this law will be used fairly

7. WHO SHOULD PLAN THE FUTURE OF OUR CITIES?

Durban and Pinetown and Pietermaritzburg and all the cities in this province, this country and in the world were built by the work of the poor. But poor people didn't only build our cities. They have also done a lot of the planning of the development of our cities. It was the poor who decided that black and white and rich and poor shouldn't live separately and who took unused

land so that everyone could live together in our cities. Our cities look the way that they do because of both the planning of the rich, the planning of various governments and the planning or ordinary poor people. For example it was Biko Zulu who decided to start a settlement in Jadhu Place near to the schools in Overport and the jobs in Springfield Park and not any government.

A democratic government should allow the poor to continue to be able to participate in planning the future of our cities. Planning should not only be a right for governments and the rich.

On Friday 4th May 2007 the Provincial Legislature came to the Kennedy Road community hall to introduce the “ KZN Elimination and Prevention of Re-Emergence of Slums Bill, 2006”. The hall was overflowing with people from affiliating settlements of the Abahlali BaseMjondolo Movement. We clearly said “No land, No House - No Vote, No Bill!” We clearly told the Provincial Legislature about the illegal demolitions and evictions undertaken by the eThekweni Municipality, the failure to provide basic services to shack dwellers and the brutal criminalization of the politics of the poor by people like Supt. Glen Nayager of the Sydenham Police Station. They said that they do not know about any of this. If they do not know what is happening to shack dwellers in their own province then they must listen to shack dwellers before making laws. Listening and talking must come before deciding.

A World Class city is not a city where the poor are pushed out of the city. A World Class city is a city where the poor are treated with dignity and respect and money is spent on real needs like houses and toilets and clean water and electricity and schools and libraries rather than fancy things for the rich like stadiums and casinos that our cities can just not afford.

We will fight this Bill in the courts. We will fight this Bill in the streets. We will fight this Bill in the way we live our ordinary lives everyday. We will not be driven out of our cities as if we were rubbish.

For comment please contact:

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2. Ms. Zodwa Nsibande, 0828302707
3. Mr. Mnikelo Ndabankulu, 0735656241
4. Mr. S’bu Zikode, 0835470474

See Also

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- [Free Speech Radio Network](#) report by Mpumi Magwaza
- ['Laws Will Improve Horrible Lives'](#) Newspaper article on the Slums Bill by Greg Arde and Stephanie Saville
- [Comment on the Slums Bill from activists in Cape Town](#)
- [Isolezwe: Bafuna ukuvikela imijondolo Abahlali](#) ngoKwanele Ncalane
- [Isolezwe: Imijondolo 'izoba umlando' KwaZulu-Natal](#) ngoMlondi Radebe noKwanele Ncalane
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- [Pictures of the 11 July illegal demolitions in Foreman Road](#)
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- [Shack dwellers unhappy with act](#) Mercury article by Sibusiso Mboto
- [Letter to the KwaZulu-Natal Premier from the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions](#)
- [Isolezwe: Abadilizelwe imijondolo bathi bazophinde bakhe ngenkani 2010](#) Phili Mjoli
- [Poor 'left out in the cold' for 2010](#) Mercury article by Colleen Dardagan
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January 25, 2009 / To Resist All Degradations & Divisions: An interview with S'bu Zikode (note 1)

[Accessed May 3, 2009 at <http://www.abahlali.org/node/5063>]

S'bu Zikode is the elected president of Abahlali baseMjondolo, a radical and radically democratic shack dwellers' movement in South Africa that has committed itself to waging its struggles independently from party political and NGO control. The movement began in the city of Durban in October 2005 following a road blockade organised from the Kennedy Road settlement in March that year. By November 2009 there were more than ten thousand members in good standing in three cities and the movement had joined with the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town, the Landless People's Movement in Johannesburg and the Rural Network in Rural KwaZulu-Natal to form the Poor People's Alliance, an autonomous national network of poor people's movements. Since 2005 S'bu Zikode has been fired from his job as a direct result of political pressure and has been subject to various forms of harassment including arrest and serious police assault. He has also become a well known public intellectual whose supporters often refer to him as the President of the Poor.

Tell me something about where you were born and who your family were.

I was born in a village called Loskop which is near the town called Estcourt. It is in the Natal Midlands. I was born in 1975. I have a twin sister, her name is Thoko. We are now the last born. I have two other sisters. I also had a brother who passed away so I am the only son.

And when we grew up, very early, at the age of 7 years, when Thoko and I started school, our parents separated. We grew up with mother who used to work as a domestic worker. She would mostly be at work and we would remain with her sister most of the days. We did not have mother close to us. She would come once a month. And then we grew from different hands. When we were doing primary school we went to more than four schools. My mother would be away and it would be hard for her to support us so we grew up with different families. They were all good to us.

When I look back I can see that that helped me a lot; learning at different schools, living with different relatives.

Where was your mother working?

In Estcourt, in town. From town to Loskop, today you are paying R9. The distance is 32 kilometres. She would come once a month.

That must have been very difficult for the children.

Ja, very difficult. Very difficult.

How was she treated by the people she worked for?

¹ This is the first in what will be a series of interviews with Abahlali baseMjondolo members. S'bu Zikode was interviewed by Richard Pithouse at the Kennedy Road settlement on 25 January 2009. Zikode made some minor edits and additions to the interview transcript on 8 April 2009 following which the explanatory footnotes were added by Pithouse. Zikode made some final additions to the transcript on 24 April 2009.

No, they were quite good people. Sometime we would visit her and I remember that they bought me a bike. They were good people. The problem is this system where so many women have no choice but to leave their homes and wash and clean for other families.

When I was older they also found me a job. When I was at school they found me a job too. I was working with their boys as well, in one of the bottle stores, pushing trolleys. They'd call me over the weekends and I'd do some temporary jobs.

But you were well looked after by the wider family.

Yes, and when I was doing Standard Three I joined Boy Scouts. I had the opportunity to go on camps and other trainings and I learned a lot about manhood. Scouting was about training future men, future citizens. I was lucky to be appointed as a leader and to have the opportunity to attend even more trainings. I remember one of the trainings that I attended in Pietermaritzburg, Lexden².

I went to Lexden as well!

Ey, you know! The Patrol Leaders' Training Unit! There was a lot of growth and learning. It was winter time. I can remember very vividly, it was difficult. And you had to decide whether to continue with this or to resign from being a Boy Scout. I remember when I returned back to the school and reported to the principal, because I would report directly to the principal who knew more about Scouts, he laughed a lot and I knew that he knew exactly what was going to happen. He asked me if I would still continue and I said 'Ja'. A lot of lessons I learnt from there, from the hardship. It was preparing me for the worst to come and I have seen it in recent years. I am sure that I was shaped and made to be able to face the challenges that we are now facing.

But it wasn't just the hardship at Lexden. It was also the focus on responsibility and involvement in the community. I remember the Scout Motto: 'Be Prepared'.

And there was also a Scout Promise; that you promise to do your duty to God and to your country, to help other people at all times and to obey the Scout's Law. I was still young and fresh at that time. I learnt the Scout's Law. A Scout's honour is to be trusted, a Scout is loyal, a Scout's duty is to be useful and to help others, a Scout is a friend to all and a brother to every other Scout, a Scout tries his best to do at least one good turn to somebody every day.

The things that I do today, for me are something that grew up in myself; my understanding of society, the social context, what the expectations are and what kind of society we are looking for.

So there was no politics but leadership was in my veins. Even at the high school level I was invited to start a Scout's movement at my school, which I did because I was growing with other boys, and then there was also a demand from the girls to start their movement. I only met the Girl Guides at the jamboree. The jamboree is a big event that brings all the Scouts and Guides together. It is one the

² Lexden is a campsite where the Boy Scouts run two week leadership training programmes. In the 1980s and early 1990s it was run along the lines of a boot camp with physical exhaustion, sleep deprivation, cold showers in the winter and so on.

happiest days of your life as a young person to get to meet all different people from different spaces. It's like the WSF³....(laughing).

The Jamboree took place in Howick, at the Midmar dam. It was mostly outdoor activities and this is how I became interested in the outdoor environment. There was a lot about how the environment is a heritage to the cherished and protected - to be enriched by our future generation - and I became very interested in plants and animals.

After the jamboree we sought the assistance from other schools to form the Girl Guides. We had seen all these boys working together, learning skills that were unknown in the community and the girls demanded the same. They had seen their brothers growing and wanted the same pride. It really shaped me a lot.

At the high school level I became more interested in ideas. I found that I could grasp things quickly and easily, especially in English and History. The teachers would often ask me to read ahead to prepare the lesson. I remember vividly how I was asked to learn about the Voortrekkers – how I learnt that to the dictionary. I had to analyse the meaning of each word all by myself ahead of others. I remember how I had to start by cutting this word Voortrekkers and to understand the word 'voor' and then 'trekkers'. Doing all these analysis it slowly became clear that we were learning about the Boers who travelled or came first in Natal. But, still, I was lucky to be given this opportunity because I learnt how to analyse things on my own and then to share the ideas. History was really about remembering dates and I found that I had a good memory.

Things were positive. I was still too young to understand the outside politics, even the family related stuff, what problems were at home. And I was fortunate in being able to finish high school, from Standard Six right through to Matric, in one high school. But in the primary school it was really difficult being circled in one family.

When you were growing up in Estcourt it was the time of the transition with Mandela being released and the ANC being unbanned. Did you think about politics much or was there much politics happening around you?

There was a lot of fighting, heavy fights. I remember my friend was shot just in front of me when we were together in a rural farm - you know these plantations where crops such as mealies⁴ get planted and grow very high with grass in times like autumn. In summer, as the grass began to grow very high, there was this fighting and shooting. Sometimes the army would boost the other side. In politics and fighting I was not involved but in the area where I stayed there was a strong presence of Inkatha.⁵ And in the Zulu tradition we believe that you do not run away in times of war. This was also the culture of Inkatha. So when there is a gunshot they would quickly mobilise and everyone goes - every man and every boy. It's compulsory. You were not asked whether you joined the party or not but you had to defend your vicinity, your surroundings. So we were involved in that way knowing that the fight was between Inkatha and the ANC. Mostly from the ANC side there would be soldiers hiding, and also shooting. You would think that you'd be fighting the other side only to find that you are fighting the army because the army would also be taking sides. They made it clear that they were

³ The World Social Forum

⁴ Maize

⁵ A Zulu nationalist movement that became complicit with apartheid.

not there to make peace. So, I mean, I was involved in that battle in the real fighting, in the life and blood of that time. The only way to free oneself was that one would hide when one gets shot. When someone needed an ambulance you could quickly assume that responsibility of facilitating first aid and calling or waiting for the ambulance to come. That could be a way out of the battle.

At school there wasn't much politics but I used to take part in the debates. Formal debates were mostly on politics but the idea was to learn to speak English - that was the whole point. But obviously the speeches that we wrote - I remember that we often learnt more from Lucky Dube, from Mzwakhe Mbuli, and so a lot of our quotes were generated from their music and poetry. It had a lot of politic. Although we were still young to understand the outside world a clear message would come. There was also the study of *Ubuntu*⁶. It was learnt at school at that time. But when we fought, when we were involved in the fight, our lives were completely independent from politics.

Scouting was also a completely non-political movement, although there were a lot of accusations from outside. People were calling us Gatsha's⁷ sons because you wear this khaki uniform which was nearly the same as the IFP uniform at that time. But we did not balk because we had nothing to do with that.

A year later when I finished school the fight was also involved at my school. I remember that some of my friends had to pull out of school because of the fighting. But in my day it didn't reach the schools. We also felt that politics was outside the school, it was something that was difficult to understand. I remember the content of the debates; the concepts and arguments were shaped by that. But we were more judged by the fluency of the language.

But we would fight the battles that we didn't understand. The mobilization tactics that were used, by the nature of being Zulu you were forced to join Inkatha. I do not remember any membership cards or even how they looked like but you would never be asked. You would be forced to come out and fight. We didn't know what we were fighting. Many people were killed at that stage. At that stage we attended a lot of funerals. In our culture we were not supposed to be attending funerals as children but it became a normal thing to attend funerals. If you didn't attend those funerals you would be accused of siding with the other party - with the ANC. It was just a difficult and confusing situation. I mean we were still very young to understand. I strongly feel that a lot of people died for no course, they did not know what they were fighting for, except that they were forced to go to war bare handed - no strategy, no politic, no ideas, no education. I strongly feel a lot of innocent died for nothing.

I remember that you once said to me that that some of our politicians, people on both sides of the ANC and IFP divide, can only understand politics in terms of killing. The history of all this killing is usually told in a very simple way with all the good people in the ANC and all the bad people in the IFP – but there were warlords on both sides.

⁶ Ubuntu is the word, in a number of South African languages, for humanism and a set of beliefs and practices animated by a conception of humanism best known through the saying 'a person is a person through other people'. It has been put to a range of political uses.

⁷ 'Gatscha' is a nickname, which became derogatory, for Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Zulu Prince and leader of Inkatha.

I remember even the terminology of Scouting, how it was used in the fighting. There would be a group of volunteers, amongst a group of men, who would volunteer to launch an aggressive attack and the terminology that was used was that they were scouts. And then we'd know for sure that the next day there would be mourning and blood, there would be dead bodies. My understanding was that to be well known, to be well respected as a person who is fighting, who is struggling for the country, you had got to kill. It was not only that you had to defend your community – you also had to be aggressive, to launch some attacks on the other side. You become known like that, you become respected.

The other dirty thing that used to happen, that used to influence the whole thing, was that if you are a school boy you would be perceived as an ANC member. So to be well recognised and well respected you must not go to school, you must not have a bath, you must not be involved with water, and you must not be smart. You must become a nasty and clumsy person. I don't know where this idea came from but a lot of smart people with tranquillity were killed not because they were members of the ANC but because they looked good, because they looked different from the others, the ones doing the fighting. From that time it was when I began to think that this was just about killing. The only reality is that people were dying. People did not know what they were dying for, what they were fighting for or what they were killing for. Even elderly people in the struggle did not understand politics. If such people were to be interviewed now I'm not sure if they could say clearly what they were dying for, being killed for.

As Zulus we were encouraged not to hide, not to run away. Instead we must face the war. What became clear was that the IFP did not have guns. Most people who had guns were ANC members. With shields and sticks it was quite difficult to fight people with guns.

I've talked so much about the IFP because I was in Loskop, a stronghold of the IFP. I remember also going to Wembezi, a township in Estcourt, and a lot of people were shot in our presence.

I know that a similar strategy was used on the other side. A group of people would be trained to attack. You know those massacres that are often referred to - they were part of a well planned fight. But this fight also killed innocent people and those that were killed did not know what they were killed for. Once a son was suspected to have been involved he was killed – being suspected was what you died for. That was the horrible situation. I cannot imagine how some of the people who are now in government, with blood in their hands, have never regretted.

As Zulu people you were mostly respected for being a good fighter. It was the whole initial tradition – that being a good fighter gives you respect. As a good fighter you would be given a position as a commander of an aggressive group – that was the whole idea. When there were these mass attacks it was always organised. When there were funerals, where there were services, prayers, or any other traditional gatherings - a lot of people together - they were just seen as an opportunity to kill people. What counts is how many people were killed. That was the whole idea. When people praised themselves they talked about how many people they had killed, not about why they were killing, not about any politics.

Because of the South African history you still ask yourself if people in power are now matured to really understand politics. They assume that if we don't have similar ideas to them that automatically make us enemies. I doubt if people are yet in the position of understanding politics. If

you do not agree with my ideas then you must die. I am sure that it is going to take time for people to understand that politics is about ideas, about discussion, should be about love and passion for one's country, so any tactic should be about how to serve the world better, how to win minds and heart of the majority. It is going to take even longer for people to understand that those debates should be open to everyone, that a real politics is not about how many people you are willing to arrest, threaten or kill; that a real politics is not a fight to be able to abuse state power but that a real politics is in fact about how many people you are willing to listen to and to serve – and to listen to them and to serve them as it pleases them, not yourself.

When did you first come to Durban?

I began matric in 1996 and that was also the year that I first came to Durban. During the weekends and when the schools were closed I stayed with my brother-in-law in Moore Road, in Glenwood. There's a flat behind Berea Centre, 264, it's called Cardigan Mansions. He was paid well. He was working as a mechanic. I worked temporary in Victoria Street in one of the stores that sells clothing, its called Smileson's. And I worked for City Girl's stores in Greyville, in Game City Centre. I spent a lot of years working for City Girl stores.

How was it to be in Durban compared to Loskop?

Ja, it was peaceful. I was living in this rich area, Glenwood. It was different. From work I'd go directly to the flat. I had no friends in Durban. As such life isolated me away from ordinary people a lot of thinking began. I began to realise how poor I was.

And university?

Well I finished my matric that year and I did well, but not as well as had been expected. There had been a lot of hope for me at the school but, you know, as you grow you begin to reflect back on things, you come to be aware of a lot of things. When you begin to reflect on the environment a lot of things begin to disturb you, to disturb your intelligence. It was also the time when I realised how I had survived the very trying circumstances over the past few years.

And obviously there was never any guidance at school so it was very difficult to proceed with tertiary education. But the following year I was fortunate to be admitted at the former UDW, the University of Durban-Westville as it used to be called. I enrolled for law. All I wanted was to become a lawyer.

Why Law?

In school a lot was said about teaching and being a policeman for the boys and a nurse for the girls. Those were the only chances and that is why we have a lot of teaches nurses, and policemen. I was encouraged at school to be a teacher but I decided to differ.

What was it like to be student?

I was not under any parental care so it was difficult. When I arrived here I had no friends. It was hard to imagine how life could be so difficult. My brother-in-law gave me a place to stay but obviously I was not his burden so I could just appreciate his accommodation. My studies were a separate deal that was beyond his burden.

I was very lonely. It was not interesting at all because I was still new in the institution without knowing anybody. It was difficult to get used to the institution and I was a very shy person; in fact when I grew up I never used to talk. Through the Scouting thing then I began to slowly become more confident. Even people who sometimes see me on the TV often don't believe it, that that man used to be so quiet in the class and now he can talk everywhere.

When I saw the challenges of being grown up that's when I began to realise that in fact school days were the happiest days of my life. I didn't want to stress people. I had to find ways of surviving. With school it was completely different. Now I had to study and I had to think of all of this, financing my studies, accommodation, and food. And so I had to withdraw from the university and continue working as a security guard.

In 1997 a teacher went on maternity leave at my school and they wanted me to stand in. They wanted me because the well respected Circuit Inspector had promised me after coming back from Lexden that should I fail to proceed with tertiary education he would find me a school to teach. This was public commitment and promise in a gathering full of teachers, parents and scholars. I was highly congratulated for this personal commitment of a Circuit Inspector. They looked all over for me but by the time they found me it was too late – and so I carried on working as a security guard. I was all by myself.

Being a security guard, how was that?

No, that was terrible. I was still young. The people that I was working for were robbing me, sometimes they wouldn't pay me. I was like earning R500 a month, sometimes this guy would give me R300. I was just well grown up, having dropped from school and then being treated like that. It was difficult but of course when I found this job at the petrol station it was much better. So even today I listen when Mashumi⁸ shares his stories of being a security guard.

Was the work dangerous?

It was. It was, ja. There were organised groups, like shoplifters, in town. They would go into the store together. One of them would keep you busy and the others would start stealing. Some of those shops, like City Girl, would have this alarm, so I would just stand by the door and watch people passing because each garment would have this alarm. That was much better. After the security job I was employed at the petrol station.

And working at the petrol station?

Well in 1997 I met Sindy.⁹ We were working together at the petrol station. She had good parents. Her mother is still working here at Tollgate, in Manor Gardens. She is working for nice people. In Sindy's family there are ten of them, eight girls with two brothers. She was staying with her mother there in Tollgate and came to work in Springfield Park. She had also finished her matric and then had to find a job. With us, in our growth, the most important thing was to finish matric then the other stuff, well, that would be an additional luck.

⁸ Mashumi Figland, elected to the positions of Chairperson of the Kennedy Road settlement and Deputy President of Abahlali baseMjondolo in 2008 and 2009, works as a security guard.

⁹ Sindy Mkhize. She is Zikode's life partner.

When did you come to the Kennedy Road settlement?

Before I came to the settlement I lived in Umlazi. It was difficult to travel with trains. And, also, I had no friends there. It was difficult, it was difficult. The in 1999 I started living here in Elf Place.¹⁰ Because I was working at the Springfield Park Service Station station, it is just here, opposite Makro. But I couldn't pay my rent. I would just work for the rent. You don't get paid much at the petrol station. As a patrol attendant you earn like R200 a week.

Then I was promoted to cashier and then they started teaching me computer at the back office. That's how things moved. After five years we moved to the PetroPort, in Queen Nandi Drive which is on the N2 Freeway, just before the Gateway Shopping Mall.

What was it like when you first came to the settlement?

Well when I was still attending at the UDW and passing the shacks I hadn't known what the shacks were looking like so I couldn't believe it. Later when I was working at the petrol station and living here in Elf Place it was easy to use the spaza shop here in the settlement and life was quite good. Obviously I could feel shame that people were living this life because I did not believe that one day I would be living here. It was tough. But coming here to use the shops I began to meet people and then as the rent was going high we started talking to people and I found a place to rent here.

I remember that we started renting here at R80, it was R80! (Laughs) In Elf place the rent was R600 a month and we had to share the rent with other people living there. We ended up having to pay R200 a month. So this was much better. We had our own place and we could even save some money. When we came here we were much relieved. Life was much better because we could live close to work and schools at an affordable cost.

But I told myself that this was not yet an acceptable life. Although I didn't know politics that much I felt that the community did not do enough to struggle for housing, for toilets, enough water. It was not acceptable for human beings to live like that and so I committed myself to change things.

What kind of organisation was there in Kennedy Road at that time?

Well the chairperson at that time was Jarphas Ndlovu. He had been chairperson for like 6 years. There were no elections.

Meetings would be called and one or two people would be known to be the committee but one man would do everything – that's how it used to work. Only one man was respected in the community. Everything had to be reported to him. There was no committee meeting. Community meetings would sometimes be called but not committee meetings. I involved myself and attended these meetings but only to find that only one man was talking and that people were failing to cope with the politics and development issues that were being spoken about. They were not given the information that you need to participate. Even the committee, if they would go meet with City they

¹⁰ Elf Place is in the suburb of Clare Estate, near to the petrol station where Zikode was working and near, also, to the Kennedy Road settlement.

would just stand outside, while he was inside. He would also meet with the ratepayer's association¹¹ on his own. He had some shops, and he rented out some shacks. People feared him. You know that old tradition of the Indunas.¹² There is a kind of respect but it is not a democratic respect.

I realised that if the community was going to be able to participate in their own development then we would have to create a democracy in the settlement, to elect a committee. It made no sense that we were voting for politicians to sit in parliament but in our own communities we still had to listen to Indunas.

What was the political affiliation of the Induna?

He was an IFP. But the settlement was always made by different groups of people.

It was difficult to get rid of the old leadership. We mobilised the young people. We started with youth activities, like clean up campaigns, and then when the people were mobilised we struggled to force that there must be elections, that there must be democracy.

How did people respond?

They were well relieved. After that first democratic election, it was in 2000, we restructured everything in terms of democracy. We had a lot of discussions about democracy.

Was that when you were first elected as chairperson?

Yes.

How old were you?

I was still young. 25.

And what was your political affiliation?

When I came here I was not interested in party politics. I had begun to hate party politics from what I had learnt from the IFP while I was still at home. For me politics was a dirty game. And there wasn't really much interest in politics in the settlement. Most people just saw it as this dirty game.

But these guys from outside, led by Mabeneza¹³, started to come to the settlement, to organise meetings, campaigning for the ANC. That's when I became interested because of the way that they were engaging and approaching the young people. They were saying that we could mobilise ourselves for a better life. We had all seen the transition to democracy at the national level. The ANC was the party of Mandela. But at the local level what I liked was what I hadn't had since my school days – an opportunity to meet other young people and to engage. And it was also a platform to engage on political matters which was an opportunity to work for the changes that I was looking for.

¹¹ Rate Payer's Associations represent residents of an area who own formal accommodation for which they pay municipal taxes – i.e. middle class and wealthy residents. They usually agitate for shack dwellers to be evicted from their suburbs.

¹² In precolonial times this term referred to a person mandated to represent a community to the Zulu king. However it was later co-opted into the governance of colonialism and apartheid as political systems as well as the management of mines, factories and so on. It is now often a pejorative term.

¹³ A local ANC leader.

And seeing that the ANC was in government I thought that it could be an easy tool to transform this community. I thought that the ANC would be a platform for the shack dwellers and that it would be able to deliver.

As residents of the informal settlements, we were considered as temporal communities. There was an inference that we were not entitled to full citizenship in this area. We thought that all we had to do to secure our place here, here in the city, was to take the initiative to support the ANC.

So in 2002 I joined the ANC and was elected to the Branch Executive Committee (BEC). The following year I became the Deputy Chairperson of the ANC branch in Ward 25.

For some years I was in the BEC. The reality is that we did not understand politics. Baig¹⁴ was brought in from the outside, imposed from the top. He was not known to the community. But because he was an ANC we did not question that. We did not question the wisdom of the party and so we did not worry about it that much although it was clear that there wasn't any fairness, any democracy.

This wasn't like Inkatha when I was growing. I wasn't made to do it. I was very active. I did it because I had my own ideas, because I thought that we should mobilise the people for a better life. But I was mobilising for the party and we made compromises for the party. Of course we discovered that mobilising for the people and mobilising for the party is not the same thing.

How did the break with the ANC come about?

Well a lot was happening. Former housing minister Dumisani Makhaye introduced the Slums Clearance programme with a budget of R200 million. A Slums Clearance committee was set up in partnership with the eThekweni Municipality, it included a number of wards. I was also elected to that committee. Kennedy Road was one of the communities that was meant to benefit from this programme. There was a settlement down there by the bridge, it was called eVukani. Those people were moved to Welbedacht.¹⁵ Some of the people from the Quarry Road settlement were moved to Parkgate. I remember taking a tour to Parkgate with the Slums Clearance committee. It was before the houses were built there, it was still sugarcane.

That is when I became conscious, that is when I became a conscious activist. I remember when we were getting into this microbus from the metro with nice air conditioning. I remember how we were told to get into those kombis but not told where we were going. I remember as we went past all those bridges that you pass as you leave the city. The further away we moved the more worried I was. We had been very excited but the comrades all became quite as we went further and further away from the city. We became very shocked. Then we arrived at a farm and we were told that this would be where our houses would be built.

Even today I do not understand the link between the BEC of the ANC and the development that took place. These projects had never been discussed with the BEC. Even when the minister announced the Slum Clearance programme it had never been discussed at the branch level. It was a top down

¹⁴ Yakoob Baig is the ANC councillor for ward 25.

¹⁵ Welbedacht, like Parkgate, is an out of town relocation site to which shack dwellers living in the city are being removed, often forcibly and unlawfully.

system, a completely top down system. For this reason I continue to question the relevance of the BEC. I continue to see it as nothing but a way for the party leaders to control the people. The only job of the BECs is to keep branches vibrant for elections. They are not there to bring about development, they are not there for any political education or political discussion. They are not there to take the views of the people up. Rather they are there for people to be enslaved and to remain slaves for the benefit of those that have been ruthless enough to rise up.

All of us in that committee had hope. We had a good heart to see change in our communities. But we did not know how politics worked. The first problem was that we had been promised that Kennedy Road would benefit but when it didn't it was hard to question that within the ANC structures.

When the promises became lies we felt that we had been used – just used to keep the people loyal while they were being betrayed. We had been used so that the people in power could fulfil their own ambitions, their own project. We were used as ladders so that they could climb up over the people to their positions. The way the system works makes it impossible for people to call their leaders into account. The resources are there but the system allows leaders to only think for themselves. There is no mechanism for accountability. There is always budget for elite projects but each and every year nothing is spoken about how to achieve real change for ordinary people.

When did you become a police reservist?

When I was working at the petrol station. I was ordered to work at least eight hours a month and to attend some police courses at the Edgewood College.¹⁶ I did a lot of volunteer work in the charge office there. I worked for, like five years, as a reservist. This was part of the decision I had made to fulfil my duty to my country.

I was forced to this. It was not that I liked to be a policeman. I was still new at the settlement and I arrived at the charge office and saw a woman crying. She had a baby on her back. I asked her why she was weeping outside and she said that she had been chased out because she couldn't speak English. I asked her to come inside with me and I translated. I was touched and angry - worried about how many poor people like her would not be assisted because they could not speak English. That's when I took the decision to become a reservist. I thought that with my English I could ensure that people would have their dignity respected.

It wasn't easy. There were interviews and tests. But when I finished it all I was never given a chance to learn at the charge office. I was just made to cook for the prisoners and to dish out for them. I was annoyed. I became to be suspicious and conscious about what was happening at the police station. The Superintendent wasn't Nayager¹⁷ at that time – it was Senior Superintendent Marais.

¹⁶ A former teacher's training college, now one of the campuses of the new University of KwaZulu-Natal produced after a series of mergers aimed at rationalisation the higher education system.

¹⁷ For some years Glen Nayager, the current Superintendent of the Sydenham Police station, waged a campaign of often violent harassment and intimidation against Abalali baseMjondolo. In 2007 Nayager had himself filmed by fellow officers as he assaulted S'bu Zikode and the then Deputy President of Abahlali baseMjondolo, Philani Zungu while they were cuffed at the wrists and ankles.

I remember our first march on the police station – it was in 2005, that march where we were saying ‘release them all or arrest us all’. Superintendent Marais met with Baba Duma, Chazumzi¹⁸ – I still have minutes of that meeting. Shortly after that march Marais left and Nayager came.

Was the racism the same?

Oh yes. It wasn’t just the senior officers. The racism was just a normal thing. It was an Indian police station – not a police station for everyone. As an African you were treated like a servant, like dirt. I could not stand it. I made a small contribution where I could. Because, you know, people are victimised and go to that police station and are just further victimised by this racism at the hands of the law. When I could I helped people but I could not transform the station. I was a victim there myself. It was quite difficult. I resigned from the police force in 2004 because of the racism. It blocked every possibility for bringing about some little progress. The only time that I ever got to do anything there beyond being a servant was during weekends where there was family violence or students having parties, any kind of noise or fight. I would be deployed to deal with drunkard Africans. It was believed that they would understand me better than any Indian police men.

But, you know, those experiences did help me.

So, given that you’d been a police reservist, and that you were on the BEC of the local ANC did the road blockade in 2005¹⁹ come as a surprise?

No, it wasn’t a surprise. The Kennedy Road Development Committee (KRDC) shaped this. In 2004 the KRDC declared that 2005 would be the year of action. We said that we were tired of this, tired of all of the lies and deeply disappointed with the previous engagement with the City. We would not compromise our future because of our loyalty to the ANC. So the road blockade was not a surprise but what did become a surprise was to see a protest becoming a movement, to see other settlements joining us.

In 2004 there were road blockades and protests all over the country and these protests became even more common in 2005. Were people in Kennedy Road inspired by what they saw in the media?

In my personal experience no. It really came from a very personal experience of betrayal. But I always asked myself how it was that 2005 became a national year of action. I am not too sure with others but for me it was not that one read about other road blockades and became motivated. The anger here in Kennedy Road was growing and growing – it could have gone in many directions but people decided to block the road.

How was the day of the road blockade?

It was good. We were all so full of anger that there was no regret. It was difficult to turn against our comrades in the ANC but we weren’t attacking them personally. We wanted to make them aware

¹⁸ Baba Duma and the late Cosmos ‘Chazumzi’ Bhengu both held positions on the Kennedy Road Development Committee in 2005 and later became activists in Abahlali baseMjondolo.

¹⁹ On 19 March 2005 hundreds of residents of Kennedy Road blocked the nearby six lane Umgeni Road and held it for four hours resulting in fourteen arrests. This event inaugurated a sequence of political events that culminated in the founding of Abahlali baseMjondolo seven months later.

that all these meetings of the ANC - the BEC meetings, the Branch General Meetings, they were all a waste of time. In fact they were further oppressing us in a number of ways. They were just there to keep the ball rolling up until the next election. Our job as local leaders was just to mobilise people for the ANC.

It had become clear that the only space for the poor in the ANC was as voters – there was no politics of the poor in the ANC. The road blockade was the beginning of a politics of the poor.

As you know I first came to Kennedy Road the day after the road blockade. People had just tried to march on the police station and had been beaten back. The settlement was occupied by the police and there was a very strong sense of people being on their own. That must have been a heavy weight to carry.

Ja, definitely. That was not easy. But we had to stand firm. That was the reality.

I had no idea that a movement would be formed, no idea. And I didn't know what form would be taken by the politics of the poor that became possible after the road blockade. I didn't know what impact it would have. That is why it is quite difficult when I get interviewed. Most people think that this was planned – that a group of people sat down and decided to establish a movement. You know, how the NGOs work.

There has been a lot of analysis and interpretation of the movement – sometimes we read it in papers. But all we knew was that we had decided to make the break. To accept that we were on our own and to insist that the people could not be ladders any more; that the new politics had to be led by poor people and to be for poor people; that nothing could be decided for us without us. The road blockade was the start. We didn't know what would come next. After the blockade we discussed things and then we decided on a second step. That's how it went, that's how it grew. We learnt as we went. It is still like that now. We discuss things until we have decided on the next step and then we take it. Personally I have learnt a lot.

There was a tremendous collective excitement and pride in the beginning. Did you share that? Or were you, as a leader, under too much pressure?

Ja, although I was very angry with everything from a political point of view, very angry with the way the ANC was treating the people, very angry with their policies, I felt very confident when we began to rebel. I found my inner peace. The real danger when things go wrong like this is being silence. When you voice out, cough it out then you can heal. You can find this faith in yourself. There is all this frustration and humiliation. Humiliation from the way you are forced to live and humiliation from the way you are treated. When it is expressed it is like taking out a poison. You become free to act and you become angry and that anger is the source of an incredible energy.

So even though we didn't have the houses we had found our voice. We didn't have all the answers. But the fact that we had built this platform, that on its own was a very remarkable progress.

Was it difficult to move from being one settlement in rebellion to linking up with other settlements and building a movement?

No, it wasn't difficult to link up with other settlements. From my experience in the ANC, and on the BEC, I knew people in the other settlements, and we were all having similar problems so it was actually easy to build up this movement.

You had worked with the ANC, the BEC and their councillors. Now you were leading marches at which the councillors were being symbolically buried.²⁰ Was that difficult? Were you under a lot of pressure?

Not really. Of course things were said and threats were made but I was very confident because I knew that I was now fighting for what I strongly believed was right. And of course we were not alone. When you are thousands you are not intimidated. So, regardless of politics, of who said what, we just carried on. And for me personally I had nothing to lose. My involvement with the ANC, my position on the BEC, had done nothing for the people. In the party you make compromises for some bigger picture but in the end all what is real is the suffering of the people right in front of you. In fact it had become a shame. To say that 'enough is enough' is to walk away from that shame. Instead of the party telling the community what to do the community was now deciding what to do on its own.

The only pressure came when people were arrested. And in the first arrest there were two teenagers amongst the 14 that were taken to Westville Prison so there was also pressure from the parents.

Today you have over ten thousand paid up members and many more supporters. When the decision was taken to form the movement, that was on the 6th of October 2005, just after the Quarry Road march,²¹ did you have any sense of what the movement would become?

No, not that much. But what I knew, what I was aware of, was that the coming together of these settlements would turn us into a collective force. That it would strengthen the rebellion that was started in Kennedy Road. I didn't have a picture of how the movement is now. But I understood what democracy should be about and that our voice would become more louder the more we are. I knew that it would become a heavy political force.

There has been a lot of academic speculation, much of not researched at all, about where the politics of Abahlalisms comes from. Some people have said it comes from the popular struggles of the 1980s with their stress on bottom up democratic practice, others have said that it comes from the churches with their stress on the dignity of each person, others have said that it is something completely new. Where do you think that it comes from?

When things go wrong silence speaks volumes. Silence is the voice of the defeated, people whose spirits have been vandalized. It is a big danger to be silence in times of trying circumstances. Condemning injustice, calling it by its real names, and doing this together; that on its own does a lot. That on its own is a kind of change, a lot of change.

²⁰ In the period between the road blockade organised by the Kennedy Road settlement and the formation of Abahlali baseMjondolo a series of marches were organised against local councillors at which they were symbolically buried – the point being to declare the political autonomy of the settlements from top down party control.

²¹ The Quarry Road settlement marched on and symbolically buried their ward councillor, Jayraj Bachu, on 4 October 2005.

The movement comes from recognition of this danger in conjunction with our cultural beliefs. It is a common sense that everyone is equal, that everyone matters, that the world must be shared.

My understanding is that this common sense comes from the very new spirit of *ubuntu*, from the spirit of humanity, from the understanding of what is required for a proper respect of each person's dignity, of what they are required to do.

Our movement is formed by different people, all poor people but some with different beliefs, different religious backgrounds. But the reality is that most people start with the belief that we are all created in the image of God, and that was the earliest understanding of the spirit of humanity in the movement. Here in the settlements we come from many places, we speak many languages. Therefore we are forced to ensure that the spirit of humanity is for everyone. We are forced to ensure that it is universal. There are all kinds of unfamiliar words that some of us are now using to explain this but it is actually very simple.

From this it follows that we can not allow division, degradation – any form that keeps us apart. On this point we have to be completely inflexible. On this point we do not negotiate. If we give up this point we will have given up on our movement.

It is not always clear what that should be done. We are not always strong enough to achieve all of our demands. This is one reason why we are sometimes quite flexible in our tactics. Sometimes we are blockading roads, sometimes we are connecting people to water and electricity, sometimes we are forcing the government to negotiate directly with us instead of the councillors, sometimes we are at court having to ask a judge to recognise our humanity.

The collective culture that we have built within the movement, that pride of belonging to this collective force that was not spoken about before, becomes a new concept, a new belief - especially as Abahlali in its own nature, on its own, is different to other politics. It requires a different style of membership and leadership. It requires a lot of thinking, not only on what is read, but on what is common to all the areas. Therefore learning Abahlalism demands, in its nature, the form that it takes. It doesn't require one to adopt some ideas and approach from outside. When you pull all the different people together and make sure that everyone fits in, that it is everyone's home, that's when it requires a different approach from normal kinds of politics and leadership. By the nature of its demand it requires a direct flexibility of thinking, able to deal with its uniqueness. It gives us the strength to support each other, to keep thinking together, to keep fighting together.

From what I have seen Abahlali is original but it is also natural – it gets generated from different people, with different ideas, who have grown up in different places, in different levels of space. Putting all this together requires its own genius. It's not the same like other movements that take their mandate and understanding from ordinary politics.

It requires learning the demands that come from all the areas – its nature demands the form that the movement takes. It doesn't require one adopting some other ideas and approach from outside. Then when you pull all the demands together and try and make sure that the movement is everyone's home it requires a different approach from normal kinds of politics. By the nature of its demand it requires a direct flexibility to be able to deal with its uniqueness. The movement is not

like an NGO or a political party where some few people, some experts in politics, sit down and decide how other people should be organised, what they should demand and how.

Other movements take their mandate, or their understanding, from what has been read. We did not start with a plan – the movement has always been shaped by the daily activities of the people that make it, by their daily thinking, by their daily influence. This togetherness is what has shaped the movement.

I am not too sure where our ideas would come from if there was no daily lives of people, a living movement can only be shaped by the daily lives of its members. I strongly believe that. This is where we formulate our debates and then our demands. We are going to court on Tuesday – winning or losing will affect how we go forward. It is the environment that we breathe in that shapes how we carry our politics forward. But it is who we are, human beings oppressed by other human beings, that directs our politics.

My next question was going to be: “What is your understanding of a living politics?” but I think that perhaps you’ve just answered that.

No, that is a simple one because we are all human beings and so our needs are all, one way or the other, similar. A living politics is not a politics that requires a formal education – a living politics is a politics that is easily understood because it arises from our daily lives and the daily challenges we face. It is a politics that every ordinary person can understand. It is a politics that knows that we have no water but that in fact we all deserve water. It is a politics that everyone must have electricity because it is required by our lives. That understanding – that there are no toilets but that in fact there should be toilets - is a living politics. It is not complicated; it does not require big books to find the information. It doesn’t have a hidden agenda – it is a politics of living that is just founded only on the nature of living. Every person can understand these kinds of demands and every person has to recognise that these demands are legitimate.

Of course sometimes we need formal expertise – we might need a lawyer if we have an eviction case, or a policy expert if we are negotiating with government. But then we only work with these people when they freely understand that their role is to become part of our living politics. They might bring a skill but the way forward, how we use that skill, if we use that skill, well, that comes out of a meeting, a meeting of the movement. By insisting on this we have found the right people to work with.

You’ve also spoken about a living communism before.²² Can you tell me what you meant by that?

For me understanding communism starts with understanding community. You have to start with the situation of the community, the culture of the community. Once you understand the complete needs of the community you can develop demands that are fair to anyone; to everyone. Everyone must have equal treatment. And obviously all what needs to be shaped in the society must be shaped equally and fairly. And of course if everyone is able to shape the world, and if we should shape it fairly, that means that the world must be shared. That is my understanding. It means one community, one demand.

²² Zikode first made a public call for a living communism in an address to the Diakonia Council of Churches Economic Justice Forum on 28 August 2008.

To be more simple a living communism is a living idea and a living practice of ordinary people. The idea is the full and real equality of everyone without exception. The practice, well, a community must collectively own or forcefully take collective ownership of natural resources - especially the water supply, land and food. Every community is rightfully entitled to these resources. After that we can think about the next steps. We are already taking electricity, building and running crèches, insisting that our children can access the schools. We just need to keep going.

Again I do not think we should be thinking away from ordinary people, having to learn complicated new ideas and ways of speaking. Instead we should approach the very ordinary people that are so often accused of lacking ideas, those who must always be taught or given a political direction. We need to ask these people a simple question: 'What is needed for your life, for your safety, for your dignity?'. That simple question asked to ordinary people, well, it is a kind of social explosion. From that explosion your programme just develops on its own.

Of course a struggle always starts in one place, amongst people dealing with one part of the human reality. Maybe they are, like us, living like pigs in the mud, strange pigs that are also supposed to survive constant fires. Or maybe they are being taken to Lindela²³ or maybe they are being attacked from the sky, being bombed. You have to start with what is being done to you, with what is being denied to you.

But for me communism means a complete community. It does not mean a community that is complete because everyone in it thinks the same or because one kind of division has been overcome. It means a complete community that is complete because no one is excluded – a community that is open to all. It means a very active and proactive community – a community that thinks and debates and demands. It is the universal spirit of humanity. Obviously this starts with one human life. We know that if we do not value every human life then we would be deceiving ourselves if we say that there is a community at all.

We are communists here in the mud and fire but we are not communists because of the mud and fire. We are communists because we are human beings in the mud and fire. We are communists because we have decided to take our humanity seriously and to resist all degradations and divisions.

You have suffered in this struggle. You have lost your job, you've been arrested, slandered, beaten. Why do you think that the state reacted so badly to the emergence of Abahlali baseMjondolo?

I think that it is because the system is such that it makes it impossible for equality. It makes sure that it divides in order to retain the *status quo*. It has created its own empire for its own people that matter to it, that are accountable to it. The system itself makes other people to be less, to be not important, not to matter.

What I was trying to do was to invade their territory and to show that we all have the power to do it.

It is a capitalist system and it is also a political system in which the few dominate the many. So it has to make certain people better than others, to be privileged over others. If you want to join the winning team then you have to fight. And it's not easy. They want us to think that we can never beat

²³ Lindela is a notorious detention centre to which undocumented migrants are taken prior to deportation.

them and that the only hope is to join them. But the system makes these different layers and it makes it very difficult, almost completely impossible for a certain layer to penetrate. That's where the issue of blood and death first comes in. This is a very strong empire.

If you decide not to join the winning team, if as a poor person you decide to change the whole game, well, then you are invading their territory, territory that is too good for you. They will first ask 'Who the hell are you?'. That is always the first question – from the councillors, the police officers, the officials, the politicians, everyone. And if you have an answer, well, sometimes intelligence is not enough. Blood and death come in again. And when you are challenging the system rather than trying to get inside it there are still these layers. Even if you pass the first layer it will ensure that you do not reach the next layer where clever people belong, people who count. If you are born poor it is taken that you are born stupid. But if you invade their territory you don't find clever people. You find that it is greedy people and ruthless people who seem to count. You find that they want to control the world. They will defend their greed. I am very clear that if you try to pass into the forbidden territory you will have to pass certain tests, certain difficulties.

I always wonder how the system can divide people. I always say that the strongest thing that the system can do is to be able to divide people which is why we all struggle in our own confined dark corners, separated from one another. At the end of the day we are the majority, not the system. But it is such that it manages to divide us, to divide our struggles. This is why the big question that most people ask is 'how few hands can remote so many people?'. Those few people in the system are able to remote the world. How do they do this? How can hundreds of people remote millions? The answer is the division of our struggles. That is why I understand why Kennedy was such a big threat. The collectivity that we built, first within Kennedy, and then between the settlements that formed the movement; on its own it is a threat to the system.

When I was growing up it was the Cold War. Although I did not understand it properly then this struggle for global supremacy affected individuals, people's neighbours, families. Moscow was struggling for power with Washington and children were fighting and dying in Loskop.

It is interesting that we send comrades to this WSF with a clear message that another world is necessary, necessary as a matter of urgency. We hear that everyone agrees that another world is possible. This is good but that no one has ever asked when this will happen, when we will all take a collective step towards this change.

I am not too sure at what stage our own intellectuals will understand the system and why ordinary people still don't have a way of changing the society. I still wonder at what stage a new communism will become necessary. I don't know when it will become clear that poor people themselves can and must come up with a new living, an autonomous life, a completely independent stance where a new order would be about alternative ways of living and working instead of trying to compete with each other or limiting our demands to the return of what is already stolen. But it is possible. Already the struggles of the poor have created a situation where everything is done in the name of the poor. The state, the NGOs, academics, the churches, the World Bank all of them are saying that what they are doing they are doing for the poor. Now that the poor themselves are saying 'not in our name', now that we are saying that we will do things for ourselves, that we will think and speak for ourselves and that we will keep going until we find our own way out and a new society is born we have opened a

real space for discussion. Our first duty is to keep this space wide open. Our second duty is to encourage as many people as possible to take their place in this new space.

But it is interesting that some people are already living according to the values of the new society where one person cannot eat up while other people's children have not eaten. Some people, like Mr. Jagarnath in Reservoir Hills,²⁴ is already doing this as a business man.

Intellectuals are also called upon to serve our little world. It is difficult to analyse and change the world, to change its format, to turn it upside down. I always remember Bishop Rubin Philip's speech when he said that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.²⁵ It is easy to say it, and it's acceptable to most people, but it's not easy to make it real. But to be realistic we must start from where we are, with what we have, from our families, by teaching our children, and then to our schools, to our little neighbourhoods and communities before we say anything at the world level like the WSF. We must not fool ourselves and produce ideas that are not grounded in any soil.

Its one thing to explain why the state reacted so badly to Abahlali but why do you think that some NGOs reacted so badly?²⁶ Was that a shock?

It was a shock but for me it was a learning. I have learnt that your enemy will not only be the state. We found a situation where people that we expected to be comrades were turning on us. But I began to understand why. When you talk of capitalism it is really not only the state. It is obviously a system, it's a system that creates its own empires. These spaces may say that they are on the side of the poor but they accept the rules of the state. They also accept the basic logic of capitalism because they are spaces that are accountable to their own interests and that protect their own interests. So in the NGO sector you find the same system. It's everywhere. I mean, it's in the social movements. People have their own spaces and they protect their own interests. There are all kinds of spaces. Obviously Abahlali has created its own space where it is able to protect its own interests, our dignity, where we can do our activities without fear.

The NGOs are not all the same. But in the NGO sector I see a lot of empires. An individual can create his own empire so that he can be ruler for life.

For many people around the world Abahlali is best known for the position that it took against xenophobia. How did the movement come to take the position that equality must be universal?

This is a bigger question, a question of people who are in this world. But we've already talked about *ubuntu*, communism and what makes a complete society. It is true that this could be in the sense of belonging. But belonging where? It could be in one country but it could also be in the world - that it is acceptable for everyone in the world to live freely without any boundaries, without any colour or any other restrictions.

²⁴ Vishnu Jagarnath has, for some years, provided all the food that is cooked for the children each day at the community run Kennedy Road crèche.

²⁵ Anglican Bishop Rubin Philip has been a longstanding supporter of Abahlali baseMjondolo. The speech referred to here was given at the Abahlali baseMjondolo UnFreedom Day event on 27 April 2008.

²⁶ In December 2006 Abahlali baseMjondolo, together with the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign declared their independence from the Social Movement's Indaba and, thereby, from the control of an authoritarian faction of the NGO/academic left. Some of the luminaries of this left responded by rushing to declare the movements as 'criminal' in the press and elsewhere.

Obviously if you were to talk about a just society then it is the human culture, *ubuntu* – that makes a complete human being. The culture, where a person comes from, the colour - this does not count. Therefore it was clear for Abahlali that we have to take a very strong side in defending human life - any human life, every human life. It is acceptable and legitimate that one person protects another. It is as simple as that.

There are no boundaries to the human life. Therefore the attack on people born in other countries, the so called foreign nationals – it was inhuman. It was very easy to take a position on this.

Obviously you have got to look at the perpetrators of this, at their intelligence, their conscience, their consciousness - their intelligence really. What ever they say about their reasons for the attacks clearly shows how the world was corrupted. People breathe a poisonous air. They get caught up, in their whole life, in a way of living where you turn an eye to one another. It is a terrible situation. This is a very big challenge for South Africans who have lived most of their life during apartheid, whose teaching was about boundaries, segregations - that not everyone was a human being. At that stage only whites were considered to be human by the system. A proper opposition to that system would reject its segregations completely and insist that everyone is human. But some of the opposition to that system has been about fighting to take a place in that system, not doing away with it. So now black people have turned on other black people, against their brothers and sisters. It is a disgrace. This is one of the damages the past laws have installed in some people's minds. A lot needs to be done to change the mindsets of those whose frustration is unsound.

The other thing that has really attracted attention was the decision that Abahlali took in 2006 not to vote. How do you understand this decision?

I think that it was a very practical decision in our politic. For a number of years we have voted but not seen any change. In 2006 Abahlali realised that we have power. We had always been asked to shout 'Amandla! Awethu!'²⁷ but refraining from voting was a way of showing that Amandla is ours. Basically we had decided not to give our power away. It has a simple message – that we had no confidence in politicians and that we believed that we could empower ourselves - that we really do believe that the people shall govern.

It was also a tactical action; a warning to the government that if they exclude us from shaping the country then we will exclude ourselves from giving them support. And it has been a way for us to start thinking about our own alternative governance.

Has the formation of the Poor People's Alliance last year given you hope?

Well I was just explaining that the strength of capitalism is how it has managed to divide our struggles. So if we are able to come together, not just nationally but also internationally, then I think that we are on a good track. This is the only way that it will really become possible to face and to contest the system. None of us will succeed on our own.

What has been the most difficult thing for you about being involved in Abahlali, and what has been the best thing?

²⁷ Power! It is ours!

The day when I had to choose from no choice. Ok, losing the job was the second aspect of it.²⁸ The first aspect of it was that I was given a choice, to either align myself with the eThekweni people, with City Hall and, you know, to have a career, opportunities or to remain with the poor. Offers were made to me. They ask you some questions the main one being 'What is it that you want in order to keep quiet?' They always see it as an individual trouble maker. Remember when Mabuyakhulu²⁹ said that 'Zikode must educate his people'. That's the belief that they had. They can't understand that I am educated by the people. But when you have four children growing here in the mud and the fire...

But I have no regrets. Working with people is not easy. And it's not just dealing with your enemies, even working with your comrades, trying to satisfy everyone is not easy. The time and the energy that is involved create a real pressure. But aside from that I have peace of mind, the inner peace.

I am more informed than I was, I am more vigorous than ever before. I am more vigilant and conscious than ever before. There is a lot of variety of things in life, more than just the politics. I have no regrets.

And the best thing?

All the victories we have won. I don't just mean victories in court, or evictions that have been stopped, or water and electricity connected. I am talking about seeing comrades becoming confident, being happy for knowing their power, knowing their rights in this world. Seeing comrades gaining a bit of respect, seeing people who have never counted being able to engage at the level at which they struggle is now fought. Young comrades are debating with government ministers on the radio and TV! Seeing the strength of the women comrades in the movement. Seeing poor people challenging the system, because it's not just about challenging Bheki Cele³⁰ or Mabuyakhulu, it's about challenging the whole system, how it functions.

Would you like to say a little more about the strength of the women comrades in the movement?

Well I am very satisfied and proud to see how some of the Abahlali settlements are chaired and led by women. This is evident in Siyanda A, B and C sections in Newlands in Durban. This is also evident in Motala Heights in Pinetown, in Joe Slovo and other settlements. From the very beginning women have been elected to the high positions of leadership in the movement and it is impossible to imagine the movement without the strength of women comrades. The Abahlali office itself is headed by a young woman, Zodwa Nsibandé, who has earned herself a high respect from both men and other women for her role in connecting the movement and the outside world. But there are also many projects that don't get the same public attention and most of these projects, such as crèches, kitchens, sewing, bead work, gardening and poetry are run purely by women.

The strength of women comes from the fact that women are expected to carry our love, not only for their children and husbands but for the communities too. Women are raised to be sensitive and caring. We are all told that a home that has a woman is often warm with love and care. A person

²⁸ On 5 February 2007 S'bu was forced out of his job at the petrol station as a result of political pressure from the Mayor of Durban, Obed Mlaba. He wrote an article about this experience titled *When Choices Can Not Be Choices*.

²⁹ Mike Mabuyakhulu is the Minister of Housing in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal.

³⁰ Bheki Cele is the Minister for Security in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal.

that is given responsibility for this love and care will fight like a lion to protect her home and her family. It is not surprising that women are often in the forefront of struggles against eviction, for toilets, for electricity and against the fires. Sometimes in Abahlali women feel that men are very slow and too compromising.

Over the years many women have faced arrest and police beatings. Women have confronted police officers, landlords, shack lords, BECs, councillors, NGOs, academics – everyone that has to be confronted in a struggle like this. The fact that Abahlali women have given away fear and decided to confront the reality of life tells us that there is something seriously wrong with our governing systems – that another world is necessary. Women don't risk their safety when they have children to care for unless they have a very good reason for doing so. The fact that women have stood up to and faced the barrel of guns during our protests is an indication that indeed another world is possible because without women nothing is possible and without courage nothing is possible. Our hopes are dependent on the courage of women.

We know that in the past that in times of any war women were never and under no circumstances touched by the physical pain associated with any war. But today poor women are shot by the same police who are meant to protect them by law. I wish to salute the role that our mothers are playing in not only raising us under these trying circumstances but in also having to face this violence from the state while fighting for a better world for us. Their motherly does not count because they are not the wives of the politicians and of the rich.

But we know that their strength changes their subjectivity to vulnerability putting them in the forefront of our struggle. We know by nature that their tears can never be ignored by a natural person for ever and ever.

I know that it's a Sunday night and your family are waiting for you. This will be my last question. What does it mean for you when you say that Abahlalism is the politics of those that don't count, the politics of those that are not supposed to speak.

I think that I have a clear understanding of this. I know from my own personal experience how I came to have enemies that I did not have because now I am speaking. When you are quiet, when you know your place, you are accepted and you are as safe as a poor person can be. But the moment you start talking you become a threat.

When one talks about the politics of those that do not count one must start from the fact that the system makes it impossible for everyone to count. If ordinary people counted it would collapse immediately. The way to hide the fact that ordinary people do not count, and that the system depends on this, is to ensure that ordinary people are taken as being unable to think and therefore unable to say anything intelligent. We are supposed to be led.

The politics of those that do not count makes no respect for those who are meant to think for everyone else, to lead. This turning the tide, when the life turns one at the front and takes him to the back, it is like you are doing a chaos because you want to do away with the *status quo*. You want to be innovative, you want to be creative, you want to live your life but it seems that the only way is to undermine those who have led the way. So you do not accept that someone must be a slave and

work for someone else. No boss will find this acceptable. You do not accept that someone must be a good boy or a good girl, an obedient follower who does not think and act for themselves. No politician will find this acceptable. They will fight up until those tides are turned back. So we must face the difficulty of this politics.

The understanding is just that simple. In order for those who count to defend their own territory someone should not talk, someone should just be led, someone should not question, someone should just be a beneficiary of those particular services that are meant to be given.

The moment that you begin to question then you are threatening the system. You are not supposed to do that, and your intelligence and capability are not supposed to allow you to voice or to take the space. The system keeps people separate. If you want to unite and to make a culture that people should be equal then you are invading the space that is forbidden to you, you are threatening the system.

That's very powerful. Thank you.

February 23, 2009 / Sibusiso Innocent Zikode: A short biography

[Accessed May 3, 2009 at <http://www.abahlali.org/node/4810>]

Submitted by Abahlali_3 on Mon, 2009-02-23 14:28. [biography](#) | [S'bu Zikode](#)

S'bu Zikode was born in 1975 in the village of Loskop, near the town of Estcourt in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. He was raised by a single mother who was often away from home as she worked as a live in domestic worker. As a school boy he was very involved in the scouting movement and he graduated from the Patrol Leaders Training Unit at Lexden in Pietermaritzburg in 1990. He attended Bonokuhle High School in Loskop from 1992 to 1996.

In 1997 S'bu registered as a law student at the former University of Durban-Westville but, due to an inability to pay his fees, had to abandon his studies later that year. After that he was worked as a security guard and then as a petrol pump attendant. In 1998 he met Sindy Mkhize, his life partner.

In 1999 S'bu and Sindy moved to the Kennedy Road settlement as they could not afford the rent for formal accommodation. Later that year he was promoted to the position of administrator at the petrol station where he had been working for some years. In 2001 S'bu became the first democratically elected chairperson of the Kennedy Road settlement. He declined to stand for re-election in 2002 but successfully stood for the position of deputy-chairperson in 2003. He was re-elected as chairperson in 2004 and held the position every year until 2007 when he decided not to stand for re-election.

Between 2001 and 2005 he worked very closely with many government housing programmes and he was a reservist at the Sydenham Police station from 2001 until 2004 and became the Director of the Clare Estate HIV/AIDS Drop-In-Centre in 1993.

At the end of 2004 the Kennedy Road Development Committee declared that 2005 would be the 'Year of Action' and a number of protests were organised in that year. In October 2005 S'bu was a founder member of Abahlali baseMjondolo – a democratic membership based and directed shack dwellers' movement. He was elected as the first President of Abahlali baseMjondolo that year and has been re-elected as President each year since then.

Abahlali baseMjondolo has started and run crèches and gardens, organised for women's rights and the rights of people born in other countries, strongly supported the rights of all children to access schools, campaigned for live saving basic services to be provided to shack settlements, organised against police brutality and hostility to poor communities and successfully used the courts to oppose unlawful evictions by the state and private land lords. The movement also negotiates with the government and NGOs to upgrade and develop settlements where they currently are rather than have shack settlements razed and their residents forcibly moved to

out of town relocation sites. The movement strongly believes that that our cities should be democratic spaces in which all people, rich and poor, are welcome.

Anglican Bishop Rubin Philip has written that:

the courage, dignity and gentle determination of Abahlali baseMjodolo has been a light that has shone ever more brightly over the last three years...Your principle that everyone matters, that every life is precious, is very simple but it is also utterly profound. Many of us who hold dear the most noble traditions of our country take hope from your courage and your dignity.

Along with other high profile members of the movement S'bu's commitment has cost him his job. In February 2007 his boss at the petrol station, a close friend of the mayor, caved to political pressure and S'bu was forced out of his job. He has also been subject to slander by politicians and unlawful arrest, detention and assault by the police.

Abahlali baseMjondolo now has more than 10 000 paid up members spread across 53 settlements in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. In 2009 the movement joined with the Landless People's Movement, the Rural Network and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign to form a national alliance of poor people's movements, the Poor People's Alliance. On 9 February 2009 Abahlali baseMjondolo signed a breakthrough deal with the eThekweni Municipality that will see 3 settlements being upgraded where they are and 14 receiving services.

S'bu is a regular commentator in the media and has published a number of articles in newspapers, magazines and academic journals. His work is prescribed reading at many universities around the world. He has also been invited to speak at universities and many social movement, NGO and church events. In 2007 he was invited to address a conference of architects in Istanbul, Turkey.

In 2009 he won a scholarship awarded for academically promising students with exceptional records of social commitment and, again, registered to study law. He and Sindy now have four children.