

# Abahlali Bayanda!

## Abahlali are growing!

Abahlali baseMjondolo has been vilified by the Durban City Council. But what is this movement? **Richard Pithouse** traces its demands and dramatic emergence and paints a picture of a determined group of poverty stricken people.

Throughout the 1990s the ANC in Durban promised, that their first priority, was “together with our people address the concerns of the poorest of the poor living in squatter camps like Kennedy Road, Lusaka and Mbambayi.” Their power, including their power to demobilise popular militancy and to speak for its traditions, was justified foremost in the name of the poorest – in “squatter camps” like Kennedy Road.

But it has become clear that the 2001 Durban Slum Clearance Project aims to subject the minority of shack dwellers to forced removals and badly constructed shack size homes in new townships on the rural periphery of the city. The Council has cast the majority as criminal, and carriers of disease and will simply destroy their homes and leave them homeless.

The city has promised to “clear slums” by 2010 and it is destroying settlements in an order determined by how visible they are to the bourgeois world. Relocation to moves people away from work, schools, health care and everything else that the city has to offer. This return to the brutal logic of

apartheid is masked by a technocratic rationality which declares itself the vehicle that will ‘deliver’ to the poor. It is presented as a technocratic not a political project, so authorities can present opposition as criminal.

### BEGINNING OF PROTESTS

On 18 March 2005 bulldozers started digging up land adjacent to the Kennedy Road settlement which the Council had promised for housing. People discovered from workers that this wasn’t housing development but a brick factory was being built. They gathered on the promised land, stopped the construction and asked the local councillor to come and explain. He arrived with the police and demanded their arrest as criminals. That night there was a mass meeting in the settlement. After careful discussion a course of action was decided. Early the next morning a few hundred people barricaded a nearby six lane road with burning tyres and held up against the riot police for four hours suffering 14 arrests. Alfred Mdletshe told *Sunday Tribune’s* Fred Kockott, “We are tired of living and walking in shit. The

council must allocate land for housing us. Instead they are giving it to property developers to make money”. With this spectacular act the settlement announced its independence from party control.

The day after, 1 200 people staged an illegal march on the police station holding the 14 arrested. Their demand was that they release them or they must arrest the entire community because “If they are criminal then we are all criminal”. The march was dispersed with beatings, dogs and teargas. The police were looking for one person in particular, S’bu Zikode, the chair of the Kennedy Road Development Committee. He escaped in women’s clothes protected by the throng. At a packed meeting that afternoon Zikode declared “We are on our own now”.

### LAUNCH OF ABAHLALI

The first two illegal protests were followed by a series of legal marches on the local councillors, involving as many as 5 000 people. The state was not impressed and went so far as to have the army occupy Kennedy Road. But the marches continued and included

people from more and more settlements. In each march the protestors carried a mock coffin and staged a funeral for the councillor outside his office. They were burying the ineffective councillors and the idea of top down party control.

Other settlements began to vote out committees accountable to the local Council and elected autonomous committees, accountable to the people in the settlements. On 6 October 2005, 17 elected men and 15 women from 12 settlements met to constitute themselves into a movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, and to



commit themselves to stand together and fight for popular democracy, land and housing in the city.

A year later 34 settlements had affiliated to the movement. In this time Abahlali have democratised the governance of settlements, stopped evictions, won access to local schools, won concessions around services like water, toilets and refuse removal; won a voice in elite structures; set up crèches, a sewing

cooperative and vegetable gardens; enabled collective bargaining with the state and capital and forced the city's slum clearance project into a serious legitimisation crisis.

When elections for ward councillors were looming, People decided to boycott. They theorised the boycott discussions that concluded that there is a difference between 'party politics' and 'people's politics'. They identified party politics as a mechanism of elite control which seeks to capture people's politics identified as a space for popular democracy.

The decision to commit to people's politics was not a commitment to pursue autonomy from the state. On the contrary there is a hard fought day to day struggle to subordinate the local state to the people and to win access to services like water, electricity, toilets, refuse removal, education and health care. However, they made a decision to pursue the political autonomy of the settlements. The decision to keep a distance from a politics that has a corrupting influence on a struggle grounded in truth was key to the rapid building of a mass movement. People in other settlements were keen to talk to people who had publicly committed themselves to remaining politically autonomous from constituted power.

Abahlali decided to announce the election boycott with a march from the Foreman Road settlement into the city and onto the mayor under the slogan 'No Land, No House, No Vote'. This was a step too far. Mike Sutcliffe, the city manager and a former Marxist academic, illegally banned the march by fax. Two days later more than 3 000 people missed a day's work and gathered in the

Foreman Road settlement which was surrounded by riot police. The Foreman Road Committee explained to the assembled that marching was dangerous under these conditions. Speaker after speaker replied that living in the settlements was just as dangerous and the 3 000 set off up the steep dirt track that leads out of the settlement singing "Yonk' indawo umzabalazo uyasivumela" (Everywhere struggle is welcome). As they stepped onto the tarred road they were attacked, shot at with pistols and rubber bullets and severely beaten. There were a number of serious injuries, many with permanent consequences, and 45 arrests.

But the police violence could not break the resolve of the marchers. Protestors, led by Fikile Nkosi, a young domestic worker, kept the police from entering the settlement with barrages of stones. While the settlement was under siege, people burnt a effigy of the mayor. Although the city managers were horrified when this detail made the *New York Times* the illegal ban on political action outside of the settlements remained in place. They even went so far as to use the police to violently prevent Abahlali from taking up an invitation to debate the mayor on *Asikbulume*, a television talk show.

Another attempt was made to march into the city on 27 February. By this time the movement had grown to 20 000 people. Sutcliffe issued another illegal ban and early in the morning the police moved in on the three largest settlements armoured vehicles and helicopters. They arrested and assaulted key people and blocked all the exits

from the settlements. But this time the Abahlali took Sutcliffe to the High Court. They won a quick victory and with the interdict in their hands marched into the city in triumph. Sutcliffe loaded his furious press statement with words like “criminal” and “anarchy”. Two days later the election boycott held across all the Abahlali settlements.

### COERCION, THEN REPRESSION

After the failure of a year trying to break Abahlali with direct repression the state came with another plan. In July they informed Abahlali that if they wanted to “engage with government” they must “be professional” and join the NGO Shack Dwellers’ International which is often used by governments to simulate popular consent for repressive policies. After the failure of the state to co-opt the movement there has been a return to open repression. On 11 September, following a series of successful actions, Abahlali was invited to an interview on Gagasi FM. S’bu Zikode, Philani Zungu and Mnikelo Ndabanakulu were just about to leave when officers from the Sydenham police station pounced. When they saw that Ndabankulu was wearing a famous red Abahlali T-shirt they pulled it off, insulted him, pushed him around, threw the shirt into the mud, made a great show of standing and spitting on it and announced that “there will be no more red shirts here”. Zungu and Zikode were thrown into the police van.

The next morning there were hundreds of Bahlali in red shirts in the Durban Magistrates’ Court. The state, bizarrely, charged Zikode and Zungu with assaulting a police



officer but the magistrate released them without asking for bail. They were joyously carried out of the court on the shoulders of their comrades. Both men had visible wounds and explained that they had been assaulted by Superintendent Glen Nayager who had hurled political abuse on them as he bashed their heads against the wall. A group of policemen enthusiastically photographed Nayager’s assault which only ended when Zungu was knocked unconscious and could not be revived.

Mnikelo Ndabankulu has a new red shirt. It was made, with hundreds of others, on a rented peddle power sewing machine by the Abahlali Sewing Collective in an all night song filled sewing session in a candlelit shack.

The police attack on the Abahlali leadership was followed by the violent demolitions of shacks in the Motala Heights, Juba Place and Palmiet. In each instance owners were removed to new houses, many against their will, and renters were left homeless.

In Motala Heights, Bheki Ngcobo tried to hand the police a copy of a lawyers’ letter to Mayor Mlaba stating that residents had signed a power of attorney and instructed their lawyer to oppose illegal evictions. He was pepper sprayed at point blank range and the demolitions continued.

The willingness of the local state to act violently and illegally against the poor means that mobilisation will not, on its own, be able to stop the looming mass evictions. However, the movement can force the municipality to obey the law by recourse to the courts. Abahlali is working hard to gain the resources to develop a legal strategy that can halt evictions and forced removals and compel the municipality to upgrade rather than relocate settlements.

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