

Abahlali baseMjondolo

What happened to the promised land?

The previous article gave background to the formation and activities of the Abahlali baseMjondolo [shack dwellers]. Here **S'bu Zikode**, the chair of the movement, powerfully argues the case of the poor and the houseless and of the necessity to take action.

The shack dwellers' movement that has given hope to thousands of people in Durban is always accused of being part of the Third Force. 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.

We need to get things clear. There definitely is a Third Force. The question is 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. 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 diseases breed. The causes are visible and every Dick, Tom and Harry can understand.

Our bodies itch every day because of 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 run across the small babies in the night. You must see how people have to sleep under bridges when it rains because their floors are wet. The rain comes inside people's houses. Some people just stand up all night.

But poverty is not just suffering. It threatens us with death. We have seen how dangerous being poor is. In the Kennedy Road settlement 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. My appeal is that leaders who are concerned about peoples' lives must come and stay one week in the jondolos. They must feel the mud. They must share six 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 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, two classes - the rich and the poor. Now after the election there are three classes - the poor, the middle class and the rich. We are becoming more poor and the rest are becoming more rich.

We are on our own. We are completely on our own.

President Mbeki speaks politics, Premiers 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 issues that affect the people – 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 Zulu. We tried English. Now we realise that they don'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. 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. Our programme was to continue with the peaceful negotiations with the authorities that started ten years ago. But 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 successful meeting with the chair of the housing portfolio 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 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 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 whatever it costs us to get what we need to live safely.

We have learnt from our experience that when you want to achieve what is legitimate by peaceful negotiations, by humbleness, by respecting those in authority your plea becomes criminal. 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 dweller to know that we are aware of what is happening in Alexander in Johannesburg, in PE, 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.

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. The community has realised that voting for parties has not brought any change to us, especially at the level of local government elections. We have been betrayed by our own elected councillor. We decided not to vote. The campaign that began, 'No Land, No House, No Vote', was a campaign that was agreed upon in all 14 settlements.

For us time has been a very good teacher. 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 elected leaders nor any officials would have told us what we are entitled to. Even the Freedom Charter is only good in theory.

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. But when you ask for what is basic you are told that there is no money. 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.

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S'bu Zikode is the elected chairman of the Abahlali baseMjondolo [shack dwellers] movement which currently includes 14 settlements in Durban.