

To Resist All Degradations & Divisions

An interview with S'bu Zikode¹

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 be 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 women 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 they 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 then 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 its 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 Nsibande, 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.