

# Shack dwellers on the move in Durban

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**S**hack settlements began to be constructed in the South African port city of Durban following the loss of land and the imposition of various taxes after the destruction of the Zulu kingdom by English colonialism in 1883 and the simultaneous movement into the city of Indian workers who had completed their indenture on sugar plantations. Colonial authorities soon tried to act against the settlements but they were defended by a series of rebellions. For a while Umkumbane, the largest settlement, flourished and its urban cosmopolitanism produced all kinds of social innovations, including its famous gay community, where institutionalized homosexual marriage was pioneered in South Africa. But in March 1958, with the population of Umkumbane at 120,000, and the apartheid state achieving its full power, the Durban City Council, working within a colonial academic and policy consensus with a global reach, began a 'slum clearance' project that forcibly removed shack dwellers to racially segregated modern townships on the periphery of the city.

Forced removals were militantly opposed, primarily on the grounds that transport costs from the new townships to work were unaffordable. In 1959 demonstrations stopped the evictions three times. There were moments when the resistances were clearly organized and articulated as a women's project. As the conflict escalated lives were lost. In January 1960, 6,000 people marched into the city. Protest in and around the settlement had been tolerated to a degree but when shack dwellers went into the city that toleration was withdrawn. The army was brought in and resistance crushed. The mass evictions were largely completed by August 1965 and are remembered as a great crime of apartheid.

Yet by the early 1980s the apartheid state, occupying Namibia, at war with the Cubans and the MPLA in Angola and battling insurrectionary township rebellions across the county, lost the capacity completely to regulate the movement of Africans. People were able to flood into the city, seize land, and found communities autonomous from the state. This movement into the city was greeted with tremendous racialized panic in white and Indian suburbs but was celebrated by the ANC underground and in exile.

There was a bitter stand-off. But by the late 1980s the World Bank-backed elite consensus was that shack settlements, now called 'informal settlements' rather than 'squatter camps', were opportunities for self-help via popular entrepreneurship, rather than a threat to white modernity, state and capital. NGOs embedded in imperial power structures were deployed to teach the poor that they could only hope to help themselves via small businesses while the rich got on with big business in gated office parks.

With the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 settlement committees were expected to affiliate themselves to the ANC-aligned South African National Civics Organization (SANCO). After the ANC took state power, SANCO was tied to the state via a system

in which each SANCO settlement committee got one seat on the Branch Executive Committee of the local ANC branch, which was chaired by the local councillor. This was supposed to facilitate the bottom-up expression of popular views. In the beginning it seemed to work. Throughout the 1990s the ANC promised that, as their first priority, they would 'together with our people address the concerns of the poorest of the poor living in squatter camps like Kennedy Road, Lusaka and Mbambayi' (*ANC KwaZulu-Natal Victory Statement*, Durban 1999). Their power, including their power to demobilize popular militancy and to speak for its traditions, was justified first and foremost in the name of the poorest – people in 'squatter camps' like Kennedy Road.

Things began to change in 2001 when Durban was selected as a pilot for the United Nations Habitat 'Cities without Slums' project. This was initially celebrated as the beginning of the redemption of the ANC's promises. But now that shack settlements were slums to be cleared, rather than informal settlements to be developed, the provision of electricity and other services to settlements was immediately halted. It slowly became clear that the slum-clearance project plans to subject the minority of shack dwellers to forced removals to badly constructed shack-size homes in new townships on the rural periphery of the city. The majority are being cast as criminal, dirty and carriers of disease and will simply have their homes destroyed. The city has promised to 'clear the slums' in time for the 2010 football World Cup and the settlements are being destroyed in an order determined by the degree to which they are visible from the bourgeois world. Relocation to the rural periphery of the city moves people away from work, schools, health care and everything else that the city has to offer and is invariably catastrophic. 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. Because 'delivery' is relentlessly presented as a technocratic rather than a political project, opposition can easily be presented as criminal or anti-national in elite publics.

As all of this has become clear, the ANC party structure, reaching down into the intimacy of daily life, has been used to contain dissent. This has often taken the form of outright and at times armed intimidation. But in 2005 the police registered just under 6,000 illegal protests across the country, most of them issuing from shack settlements. Both the ANC elite and the left intellectuals who work on policies for the poor – rather than in the politics of the poor – share the view that the poor are demanding a more effective technocratic 'delivery' and refer to this upsurge in popular militancy as 'service delivery protests'. Speaking *to* the poor rather than *for* the poor would quickly disabuse them of this assumption.

### **The meeting is the engine**

In Durban the first major break with party control of the settlements happened on 19 March 2005. The previous day bulldozers had started digging up a piece of land adjacent to the Kennedy Road settlement which had long been promised for housing. People had discovered from the workers on the site that this wasn't the beginning of the long-promised housing development but that a brick factory was being built. They gathered on the promised land, stopped the construction and asked the local councillor to come and explain what was happening. He arrived with the police and demanded the arrest of his constituents. They are, he said, criminal. That night there was a mass meeting in the settlement. The SANCO committee came under serious pressure and after long and careful discussion a new course of action was decided on. Early the next morning a few hundred people barricaded a nearby six-lane road with burning tyres and held it against the riot police for four hours, suffering fourteen arrests. With this spectacular act the settlement announced its independence from party control.

On the Monday after the road blockade, an illegal march on the police station where those arrested had been held was dispersed with more beatings, dogs and tear

gas. At a packed meeting that afternoon back at the settlement, there were none of the empty slogans, pompous speeches or ritualized invocations of the authority of leaders that characterize national liberation movements in, or close to, power; just short and intensely debated practical suggestions. The people of Kennedy Road had entered the tunnel of the discovery of their betrayal and discovered their capacity for open resistance. There was, in that moment, an overwhelming sense of profound collective isolation from the structures and pieties of constituted power. It was feared they would pay a high price for their exile from subordination to external authority. But they undertook this exile, and sustained it, as it steadily showed itself to require hiding in the bushes, beatings, arrests, anxious families, circling helicopters, nightmares and, for some, death threats.

The first two illegal protests from Kennedy Road were followed by a series of legal marches on the nearby local councillors, by up to 5,000 people. The state was not impressed and went so far as to have the army occupy Kennedy Road in a spectacular display of power. But the marches continued and included people from more and more settlements. In each of these marches the protesters carried a mock coffin and then staged a performance of a funeral for the councillor outside his office. They were burying not just the councillors as deficient instances of councillorhood but the whole idea of top-down party control. Kennedy Road had had to break with SANCO when they accepted political exile. But now other settlements began to vote out SANCO committees, seen as accountable to the local councillors, and to elect autonomous committees, seen as accountable to the people in the settlements. In some settlements this resulted in serious and often armed intimidation from members and associates of former SANCO committees. But on 6 October 2005 seventeen men and fifteen women, elected as representatives from twelve settlements that now had autonomous committees, met to constitute themselves formally into a movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo (people who stay in shacks), committed to fighting for popular democracy, land and housing in the city. A year later, thirty-four settlements are affiliated to the movement. In this time the Abahlali have democratized the governance of settlements, stopped evictions, won access to local schools, won some concessions around services like water, toilets and refuse removal; won sustained access by men and women to voice in elite publics; set up crèches, a sewing co-operative and vegetable gardens; enabled collective bargaining with the state and capital and forced the city's slum clearance project into a serious and popular legitimation crisis.





From the beginning the meeting was the engine of struggle for the Abahlali. Music, dance, ecumenical memorials for people who have died in the relentless shack fires, just hanging out, and now a sixteen-team football league, all work to sustain courage and weave solidarity. But the meeting, which is open to all, is where the intellectual work is done. The discussion at Abahlali meetings is not a performance of inclusion to legitimate an outcome determined elsewhere. Elected leaders and individuals with various forms of relative privilege are routinely subject to positions they did not arrive with. When the meeting produces a result, everyone is committed to it. This is due to deeply held ethical commitments; but it is also through necessity. There is no other way to build and sustain popular consent for a risky political project among

a hugely diverse group of vulnerable people with profound experiences of marginalization and exploitation in multiple spheres of life, including political projects waged in their name. There is no patronage to dispense. If democracy becomes a performance, rather than a reality, the collective movement out of the places to which shack dwellers are formally restricted will stop. Everyone knows this.

### **A new red shirt**

At the beginning of 2006, the elections for ward councillors were looming. It was decided to stage a collective boycott. The boycott was carefully discussed in a series of meetings, which concluded that the difference between 'party politics' and 'people's politics' is that the former, as a mechanism of elite control, will always seek to capture the latter, as a space for popular democracy. The commitment to people's politics was not a decision to pursue autonomy from the state. On the contrary there is a hard-fought day-to-day struggle to subordinate the local manifestations of the state to society and to win access to state services like water, electricity, toilets, refuse removal, education and health care, on the terms of each settlement. However, it was a decision to pursue the political autonomy of the settlements that was the key to the rapid building of a mass movement.

It was decided to announce the election boycott with a march from the Foreman Road settlement into the city and on the mayor. As in 1960 this was a step too far. Mike Sutcliffe, the city manager and a former Marxist academic, illegally banned the march by fax. Nonetheless, two days later more than 3,000 people missed a day's work and gathered in the Foreman Road settlement, which had been surrounded by riot police. Marching would be very dangerous under these conditions, but 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). The banners in the front read 'University of Abahlali base-Mjondolo' and 'No Land, No House, No Vote'. As they stepped onto the tarred road that marks the beginning of the bourgeois world 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 forty-five arrests. But the police violence could not break the resolve of the marchers. Protesters, led from the front by Fikile Nkosi, a

young domestic worker, successfully kept the police from entering the settlement with barrages of stones. A suited effigy of the mayor was burnt.

A second attempt was made to march into the city on 27 February. Once again all of the necessary steps had been taken to stage a legal march into the city. By this time the movement had grown to the point where 20,000 people were expected. Sutcliffe issued another illegal ban and early on the morning of the 27th the police moved in on the three largest settlements in a military-style operation using armoured vehicles and helicopters. They arrested and assaulted key people and blocked off all the exits from the settlements. But this time the Abahlali had garnered the connections to be able to take Sutcliffe to the High Court. They won a quick victory and with the interdict in their hands marched into the city in triumph. Two days later the election boycott held across all the Abahlali settlements.

After more than a year spent trying to break Abahlali with direct repression the state came up with another plan. In July they informed Abahlali that if they wanted to be able to 'engage with government' they must 'be professional' and 'serious' and join the transnational NGO Shack Dwellers' International, which is often used by governments to simulate popular consent for repressive policies. Sections of the professionalized NGO-linked Left have been equally keen to subordinate this mass movement of the militant poor to various docile simulacra of people's power. For a while it looked as though the emergence of a militant mass movement of the poor would be able to democratize and deracialize some of the spaces and networks through which the professionalized Left use donor money to exercise their various modes of vanguardism. But it has now become clear that these spaces are not reformable. In many instances the response to the eruption of the mass movement of the militant poor into these spaces has been paranoid and startlingly authoritarian rather than celebratory. Abahlali have routinely been instructed to attend, and thereby legitimate, meetings planned by email, held in a language and jargon most don't understand, with agendas over which they have no influence and in places which are difficult for the poor to access. The standard division of labour in these meetings, a division that is often racialized, is that the poor get a few minutes to report on their experiences while professional activists do the thinking and decision-making. In many instances the real function of the meetings is to simulate the appearance of legitimacy for local and transnational networks of professional NGO-based or -linked activists.

After the failure of the state's attempt to co-opt the movement via the Shack Dwellers' International there has been a return to open repression. On 11 September, following a series of successful actions, Abahlali were invited to an interview on Gagasi FM. S'bu Zikode, Philani Zungu and Mnikelo Ndabanakulu were just about to leave for the interview from Kennedy Road when officers from the Sydenham police station, notorious in the settlements for its corruption, brutality and anti-African racism, pounced thrusting guns into the faces of the Bahlali and subjecting them to racialized verbal abuse. When they saw that Ndabanakulu was wearing one of the famous red Abahlali T-shirts they pulled it off him, 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'.

The next morning there were hundreds of Bahlali in red shirts in the Durban Magistrates' Court. The state charged Zikode and Zungu with assaulting a police officer, but the magistrate released them without asking for bail. Both men had visible wounds, explaining that they had been personally assaulted by the superintendent, who had hurled political abuse on them as he bashed their heads against the wall.

Mnikelo Ndabanakulu has a new red shirt. It was made, with hundreds of others, on a rented pedal-power sewing machine by the Abahlali Sewing Collective in an all-night, song-filled sewing session in a candlelit shack. *Yonk' indawo umzabalazo uyasivumela.*

For further information on Abahlali baseMjondolo visit [www.abahlali.org](http://www.abahlali.org).