

iPolitiki ePhlayo: The Abahlali baseMjondolo Manifesto for a Politics of the Poor

Manifesto of the militant South African shack dweller's movement Abahlali baseMjondolo. The movement has over ten thousand paid up members, mostly in the cities of Durban & Cape Town, and its active supporters number about 50 000.

There are lots of documents that lay out the logic of oppression. There are some that lay out the logic of a better society. But there are very few that lay out the logic of a politics of resistance. This is a pity because we have to start with our own resistance. Our own resistance is here now and it is real and it is ours. Here are the basic principles of Abahlalism as they have been worked out in many meetings during the course of our struggle:

- We are all created in the image of God therefore everyone is important. God does not want us to suffer. The forces that make us suffer are evil and must be opposed.
- The power of money over people is one source of evil in the world. The power of politics, with all its ambition, rivalry, corruption and lies, over democratic discussion is also a source of evil. The hatred and fear that some rich people feel for the poor is another source of evil. The hatred and fear that some whites and Indians feel for Africans is another source of evil. The power that some men exercise over women is another source of evil.
- Everyone who is in a settlement is from that settlement. Everyone who is poor is poor. It doesn't matter what language you speak or where you were born or where your ancestors came from. All poor people are welcomed into our movement.
- We rebel because we are oppressed. We are oppressed because we are excluded and exploited. We are excluded and exploited because the war waged on our ancestors forced them into tiny pieces of land only big enough to raise workers for the factories and the mines and the farms and kitchens. Our parents' wages were not enough to escape poverty. We came to the cities searching for a way out.
- Here in the cities we can, sometimes with a struggle, get access to the schools, hospitals, libraries, culture, cathedrals and sports fields.
- Here in the cities we live in mud and shit constantly at risk of fire and eviction.
- Here in the cities we are excluded from good land, housing, electricity, easy access to water, protective policing, refuse collection, places to trade and safe and decent work. We are also excluded from the places where power has top down political and economic power.
- The municipalities want to force us right out of the cities. They want to dump us in rural ghettos just like the poor were dumped in rural ghettos in the 1950s and 1960s under apartheid. Now they are even talking about dumping us in transit camps. One Lindela is one Lindela too many.
- Our work makes the cities work but we are exploited in our work. Some of us wash or sell all day for R15. Some of us work in the factories and at the petrol stations or as cleaners. Some of us stand on the side of the road all day waiting for jobs that seldom come. When the jobs come we are there and we are ready to work for little money. But as the cities get bigger and richer there is less space for us.

- We are also exploited politically. We fought for justice as much as anyone. But for the politicians, the parties and some NGOs and activists we are a ladder which they use to climb to wealth and power.
 - Our exclusion and exploitation make us suffer. Our suffering justifies our rebellion.
- Our rebellion is also justified by the fact that we and our parents and our ancestors struggled for justice in this country.
- Our suffering is a hidden truth of the world. Our rebellion brings this truth out and shows things that were hidden about the true nature of the world.
- We are experts in our suffering and in the struggle that stems from our suffering. We are Professors of our suffering and our struggle.
 - Our rebellion is built on three foundations: respect, courage and action. We respect everyone in the movement old and young, women and men, new members and old members. Part of respect is kindness and solidarity. But part of respect is also agreeing to stick to the truth. We face the truth, we tell the truth. We face the truth with courage, we tell the truth with courage. We act to oppose evil and we act with courage.
 - Our struggle is thought in our meetings. The structure of our meetings is clearly explained in our constitution.
- We are not politicians and we do not want to be politicians because politicians rule over other people. We are not activists and we do not want to be activists because activists want to lead other people. We are ordinary poor people who have said 'Sekwanele!' (Enough!). We want to be ordinary people who do not suffer any more.
 - Everyone whose power comes from taking the right to speak for the poor wants us to stop thinking and speaking for ourselves. Politicians, activists and NGOs all do this. They all tell us that we are 'out of order' when we think and speak for ourselves. We say yes, we are out of order. We say it is good to be out of order. We say this because we know that this order is built on us either being seen as the ones that suffer in silence or as the ones that threaten everyone else with short minded anger. This order is the order in which we are excluded and exploited.
 - The time has come for poor people all over the world to define ourselves before someone else defines us, thinks for us, speaks for us and acts for us.
 - We are poor, not stupid.
- Some people in the government and some people in left NGOs have united to lie and to call us criminals in the media for thinking and speaking for ourselves. It is clear that when the poor think and speak for ourselves we make ourselves a major threat to the order of oppression. We want to be a threat to this order. It is good to be a threat to this order. Those activists in left NGOs that don't want the poor to speak for themselves are not serious about challenging oppression. They just want a good place for themselves on top of our struggle. They are just like the politicians in whom we no longer have faith.
 - The politicians come to us at election time.
 - The NGO activists come to us at their meeting times.
 - We live our lives in our communities every day and night.

- We form alliances with all organisations that are prepared to talk to us and not for us, to struggle with us and not for us and to respect our democratic processes. We have strong alliances with other movements, NGOs and churches.
 - We have learnt that there is a big difference between party politics and the people's politics.
 - Party politics is the politics of power, rivalry, lies, corruption and ambition.
 - People's politics is the politics where ordinary people can take control of their own lives.
 - Everyone who enters party politics has to obey the people at the level above them.
- If you are elected to a position in people's politics you must serve the people who surround you – there is no one above you.
 - In party politics you are paid a salary – you take.
 - In people's politics you are not paid – you give.
 - In party politics experts decide and their skills are kept for them alone.
 - In people's politics the people decide and all the skills of the struggle are shared.
 - In party politics only leaders can speak for the party.
- In people's politics the chance to speak for and represent the movement is shared. We do not allow NGOs or the media to individualise our movement by making one person stand for the whole movement. We insist that NGOs invite the movement to elect representatives to come to their meetings instead of inviting individuals of their choice.
 - In party politics decisions about money are made in small committees.
- In people's politics all decisions about money that comes to the movement are taken in democratic meeting.
- Party politics is a dead politics. Politicians speak a language that ordinary people can't understand and turn the living experience and intelligence of ordinary people into a story that they tell about The People. This is their story – it has not space for our experiences and thinking. This is how we are disciplined from above.
 - People's politics is a living politics. When we speak we do not use the zim zims that give the politically educated power over ordinary people. We speak to be understood. Every young man and old gogo must understand what we are saying and why. We start our discussions from the lives of the people and move from there. This is the discipline that we choose for ourselves.
- We buried our councillors. We gave them funerals. Then we marched on the mayor and then the Housing Minister and then we marched into the University of the Government (and for the rich) under the banner 'The University of Abahlali baseMjondolo'. We were burying the politicians in the government and the politicians and activists in the NGOs and the University so that we could live as human beings. Every human being matters. Every human being thinks.

- We do not vote for politicians and parties anymore. This kind of voting to send someone away so that they can rule over us gives away our power. We make ourselves strong so that whoever is the councillor or the mayor or the minister will have no choice but to speak to us. We make ourselves strong so that no one can decide for us without talking to us. We vote all the time in our committees and our movements. The people that we elect are not elected to decide for us. They are elected to make sure that decisions are taken democratically. We can recall them at any time. Because no one is paid to be in our movement no one struggles for money in the name of the poor.
- Our demand to the people who say that they are worried about our suffering and who want to speak for us is that they must learn to speak to us and not for us. They must speak to us where we live, at the times when we are free and in our languages. If they can't speak our languages we will organise translation. Akukho ngxaki. It is best if they can live where we live for sometime before we begin the discussions.
- Our discipline that we impose on ourselves is that we only struggle with people and never for people. We stick to this no matter how desperate their circumstances.
- Our politics is a politics of the poor. This means that our politics is a homemade politics. We meet by candle light in shacks that we have built for meetings. We don't need conference centres. We make our politics where we live. Our politics is a politics that everyone can afford. We speak in the languages that the poor speak and we speak to be understood. Our politics is a politics that everyone can understand. Our politics welcomes everyone who lives in the settlements – women and men, the young and the old, people from everywhere. Our politics is a politics that everyone can be part of. We are not conference specialists. People from outside who want to develop solidarity should come to the politics of the poor, not to conferences.
- We do not accept money that is given to us to make us do or think what the people with the money want us to think and do. We do not accept money that goes to an individual rather than to the movement. These kinds of money we call breyani money. We do accept money that leaves us free to think and act for ourselves and which can be owned and used under the democratic control of the movement. But we make sure that we never organise in a way that makes us dependent on this money. If we become dependent on money then the people with money can start to control us at any time. We must always be ready to go back to organising without any money from outside.
- Our politics is also a home for the poor. We are not wanted in this society so we have to make our own home. We have to build our own shacks and to build a movement where we feel at home. Struggle is hard but because our movement is a home it keeps us together and it keeps us strong.
- In some homes women are oppressed. In our movement we make sure that women are always strong.
- The government, academics and NGOs all tell us that we are fighting for delivery. They tell us this so much that sometimes we start believing it ourselves. But we are not fighting for delivery when we demand land & housing in the city. If they spoke to us they would understand that we know that delivery means forced removal to a formal jondolo outside of the city. We are fighting for the right to define ourselves and to decide our own future. The cities were built by the poor, by migrant workers. The poor planned the land invasions that turned the cities into places for everyone. Now we want to plan the future of the cities. We don't expect to do this on our own. But we expect to be at these discussions and we expect that the needs of the worst off will be put first at these discussions.
- We have declared our own university – the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo. We have done this because every struggle needs careful thought and we think our struggles for our selves. People who are serious about thinking about poverty and struggle should come and be part of the discussions here. Letting a few of us into NGO and academic conferences, which are conferences of the rich and the powerful, to sit quietly while people speak about us in languages and words that we don't understand is not solidarity. It just another way to

make us into ladders. When we marched into the University of the Government, which is the University for the Rich, the academics who call themselves socialists called us criminals. It is clear that they will defend their right to think and speak for us by all means. Therefore they cannot liberate us. We will liberate ourselves through thinking about our own lives and experiences in our own university.

- The NGO activists tell us that we must obey them because they are struggling for socialism. Our first question is 'How can they struggle when they have no masses?' Ideas without masses will just be blown around in the wind. Our second question is 'Why is it always that we must obey someone now to be liberated later but that later never comes?'. We can't always be waiting. We have already been betrayed once. Therefore we have already liberated ourselves politically. In our movement there is already complete political equality and everyone is respected. It is true that economic liberation is harder. We do look after each other by building crèches and gardens, making sure that no one is ever left homeless after a fire. But we can't get money or do away with money within our movement. But if the poor are no longer silent, if the poor are politically freed right now, then the economy will have to change because the poor are the majority and our voices will be loud enough to force any politician to put the last first.
- God loves the poor and is with us in our struggle. We will not give up. We can't give up because if give up we will be driven out of the cities and out of hope.
- We are fighting for land and housing in the cities. We are fighting for services in the settlements while we wait for land and housing. We are fighting for our children to be able to go to good schools. We are fighting for a basic income for everybody. We are fighting to make sure that all settlements are run democratically. We are fighting for the poor and women to be strong. We are fighting to be able to define ourselves and to make our own decisions about our own future. We are fighting so that we can also be city planners. We are fighting for cities where everyone is welcome and where everyone matters. We are fighting to bring the rich down to the level of the poor so that we can discuss the future in the places and languages and at the times where the poor are strong. We are fighting to shift power from the high levels where a few rich people rule in the name of the poor majority to the low levels where the majority, the poor majority, have been waiting for too long in the mud and shit and fires. We are fighting so that life doesn't have to be a fight any more.

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