

## Foreword

Richard Pithouse initially told us at Abahlali baseMjondolo about Frantz Fanon when we were dealing with arrests after our first road blockade. He said Fanon had written that every generation has to discover its mission and either fulfil it or betray it. Fanon discovered what we have discovered in our generation: if you are serious about victory, about succeeding to humanise the world, even a little bit, then your struggle must be a living politics. It must be owned and shaped in thought and in action by ordinary men and women. If every *gogo* (grandmother) does not understand your politics then you are on the road to another top-down system. You also run the risk of being on your own in the face of repression.

Every struggle must begin at the point where the people who have decided to rebel find themselves, with the resources that they have, on the basis of the experiences that they have had, in the face of the limits and dangers they encounter and with the understanding that they have. Because the world is always in motion, every struggle has to begin on its own. But when a struggle moves and grows you discover new friends and, also, new ancestors in struggle. We began our struggle knowing very well about Nelson Mandela, about Steve Biko, about *Inkosi Bhambatha*, about the women of Cato Manor, about the trade unions and the United Democratic Front (UDF). We have felt very close to some of these ancestors of our struggle. Many of our comrades were in the trade unions or the UDF; some are the children of the women of Cato Manor; a grandson of Bhambatha is one of our respected older members; and we have felt a strong connection to Biko through Bishop Rubin Phillip.

But we did not know about Paulo Freire or Frantz Fanon when we began our struggle. This we learnt on the way. We have also met many new friends. Nigel Gibson is one of these friends. He has participated in our discussions, although often from far away, and he has stood with us outside the Sydenham police station.

We have often said that struggle is a school. The first point of learning is the thinking that people do about their situation, their struggle and how their struggle is received. But there is also a learning that comes from the solidarity that a struggle experiences once it is in motion.

We have learnt to draw a clear distinction between those forms of leftism that accept that everyone can think and which are willing to journey with the poor, and

those forms of leftism that think only middle-class activists, usually academics or NGO people, can think and which demand that the poor obey them. We have called this second type of left the regressive left. They may say things differently to the state when it comes to the World Bank or to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy but when it comes to how they relate to us we see no difference in how they behave and how the state behaves. The tendency to treat our insistence on the autonomy of our movement as criminal is the same. The tendency to co-opt individuals and slander movements is the same. The desire to ruin any movement that they cannot rule is the same.

Fanon believed that everyone could think. He believed that the role of the university-trained intellectual was to be inside the struggles of the people and to be inside the discussions inside the struggles of the people. There is no doubt that Fanon would have recognised the shack intellectuals in our movement. He would have discussed and debated with us as equals. Fanon believed that democracy was the rule of the people and not the rule of experts. He did not think that democracy was just about voting every five years. He saw it as a daily practice of the people. He was a philosopher who wanted to be inside the movements that developed and expressed and enforced the will of the people. Clearly we can claim him as one of many ancestors of our own struggle.

People come into our movement from many different political traditions and social experiences. Some come from the African National Congress (ANC) and some come from the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) or the Minority Front (MF). To bring all these people into our living politics, into Abahlalism, is only possible if we do two things. Firstly, we have to start from the ordinary lives of people and to move from there. Everyone can recognise the logic that if people don't have water they need water. Secondly, we have to continually discuss the bigger meaning of our struggle. This was relatively easy to do in the early days of the movement. After we faced serious repression it became more difficult. When comrades are in jail, sleeping in strange places with only water in their stomachs and some bread for their children, fearing for their lives and the safety of their homes, it becomes difficult to discuss the meaning of our politics.

Fanon discussed philosophy in the middle of the Algerian War. This is an inspiration. The lesson is that we have to keep thinking and discussing even in the middle of a crisis. The cost of failing to meet this challenge is too high. When we

respond to repression, that response should not only include ensuring the safety of our members, support and justice for people in prison, maintaining the structures of the organisation and mobilising solidarity – it should also include a continual discussion of Abahlalism.

Our daily political practice is our humble attempt to continue the struggle to fulfil the striving for freedom and justice that people like Biko and Fanon wrote about. Biko and Fanon both believed in individual freedom and collective liberation. One of the deep problems in our society is that liberation has been privatised. From the bottom of society to the top, there are people who think and even say that liberation is a question of getting rich.

The power of our organising comes when we reject this individualist understanding of liberation and accept collective responsibility for society, from the level of families, to neighbourhoods, cities and the entire society. A progressive, democratic and just society in which everyone can participate in decision making and in which the land and wealth are shared cannot be built by individual endeavour.

A person cannot be complete in isolation from other people or without just and equal relations to other people in one's surroundings. Some people believe they can blunt their humanity with the things they buy but this is an illusion. As a rich man drives out of his gated community he knows in his heart that he is not a better man than the security guard at the gate. People are scared to accept the reality of equality because it is incompatible with the privatisation of liberation.

Once it is accepted that a person can only be a complete person in relation to others and that all others are human and must therefore count, it becomes clear that all people's rights must be protected and that they must have the opportunity to enjoy life. This requires action, real action in the world.

It is an illusion to think that we can distance ourselves from the collectivities that have made us. It is the power of the party political system and money that builds the gated walls of the rich. It is the same walls that divide the rich and the poor. Party politics, ethnic politics and borders also divide us. These walls do not only divide us physically, they are also there to teach us that liberation has been privatised and that success is getting yourself and your family on the right side of the walls. It is these walls which breed individualism and make it difficult for activists to organise collectively. Therefore, our most urgent task, the mission that our generation shares with older generations, is to emphasise the fact that a person is a person wherever

they find themselves. This is regardless of their origin, skin colour, gender, religion, creed, age and socio-economic status. A real movement with real members engaged in a real struggle has to negotiate all the time and sometimes compromises must be made. But these are tactical compromises. When we discuss philosophy in our university we realise the value of the distinction between tactics and principles. A principle can never be compromised and we must never compromise on the principle that all people are equal, that everyone must count.

When organising in Abahlali we do not encourage individual membership. In order to encourage the culture of collectivity, Abahlali reminds all its members of the importance of their families and neighbourhoods. So when one takes membership of the movement, one takes a responsibility to encourage others to join the movement. Apart from building a mass movement, the reality is that it is always one's family and one's neighbours in one's own settlement that arrive first in difficult times of evictions, floods, shack fires, crime, police raids, police brutality, arrests and death. We have a duty to look after one another. We encourage everyone to take that duty seriously and at the same time we make it clear that our leaders do not always have the answers and that our struggle is not in our offices. Our struggle, like our strength, is in our united communities. But without a culture of collectivity this power will never be realised.

We always emphasise to our members that Abahlali will not struggle for them but will only struggle with them. There is nothing for the community without committed individuals and families and there is nothing for individuals and families without united and strong communities. This form of activism leaves, from the onset, a lot of responsibility to a particular settlement. This form of struggling means that sometimes the movement may be strong while a particular settlement is weak. But it also means that the strength of the movement is not with the leadership. It is in the communities and its fate is held in the hands of ordinary members. Whatever strength the movement has comes from this way of organising.

When invitations are received for the movement to elect delegates to represent Abahlali elsewhere, it is the general meeting that decides whether or not it is in the best interest of the movement to accept that invitation. If it is agreed that a delegate should be sent, it is the meeting that decides who is to be delegated. This helps to do away with the problem of having the same faces represent the movement all the time and it aids many people to learn new skills. It helps to promote collectivism. We are

aware of the danger of sending the same few individuals to represent the movement all the time. These include the risk of co-optation, individuals detaching from the rest of the group as they become popular and the possibility of corruption. This culture of collectivity helps to build a responsible society – a society where none of us will enjoy life until everyone else is free.

It is practical to struggle locally to make a real difference globally and to build real movements. The local must always be the road to the global. When we meet globally we should meet as elected, mandated and rotated representatives of strong local struggles.

Our struggle continues.

We are grateful to Nigel Gibson for bringing the work of famous intellectuals into conversation with the work of the shack intellectuals.

*S'bu Zikode*  
*Durban*  
*December 2010*