The shack dwellers’ movement that has given hope to thousands of people in Durban is always being accused of being part of the Third Force. In newspapers and in all kinds of meetings this is said over and over again. They even waste money investigating the Third Force. We need to address this question of the Third Force so that people don’t become confused.

I must warn those comrades, government officials, politicians and intellectuals who speak about the Third Force that they have no idea what they are talking about. They are too high to really feel what we feel. They always want to talk for us and about us but they must allow us to talk about our lives and our struggles.

We need to get things clear. There definitely is a Third Force. The question is what is it and who is part of the Third Force? Well, I am Third Force myself. The Third Force is all the pain and the suffering that the poor are subjected to every second in our lives. The shack dwellers have many things to say about the Third Force. It is time for us to speak out and to say this is who we are, this is where we are and this how we live. The life that we are living makes our communities the Third Force. Most of us are not working and have to spend all day struggling for small money. AIDS is worse in the shack settlements than anywhere else. Without proper houses, water, electricity, refuse removal and toilets all kinds of diseases breed. The causes are clearly visible and every Dick, Tom and Harry can understand. Our bodies itch every day because of the insects. If it is raining everything is wet – blankets and floors. If it is hot the mosquitoes and flies are always there. There is no holiday in the shacks. When the evening comes – it is always a challenge. The night is supposed to be for relaxing and getting rest. But it doesn’t happen like that in the jondolos. People stay awake worrying about their lives. You must see how big the rats are that will run across the small babies in the night. You must see how people have to sleep under the bridges when it rains because their floors are so wet. The rain comes right inside people’s houses. Some people just stand up all night.

But poverty is not just suffering. It threatens us with death every day. We have seen how dangerous being poor is. In the Kennedy Road settlement we have seen how Mhlengi Khumalo, a one year old child, died in a shack fire last month. Seven others have died in fires since the eThekwini Metro decided to stop providing
electricity to informal settlements. There are many Mhlengis all over our country. Poverty even threatens people in flats. In Bayview, in Chatsworth, a woman died of hunger earlier this year – she was fearing to tell the neighbours that she had no food and she died, alone.

Those in power are blind to our suffering. This is because they have not seen what we see, they have not felt what we are feeling every second, every day. My appeal is that leaders who are concerned about peoples’ lives must come and stay at least one week in the jondolos. They must feel the mud. They must share 6 toilets with 6 000 people. They must dispose of their own refuse while living next to the dump. They must come with us while we look for work. They must chase away the rats and keep the children from knocking the candles. They must care for the sick when there are long queues for the tap. They must have a turn to explain to the children why they can’t attend the Technical College down the hill. They must be there when we bury our children who have passed on in the fires, from diarrhoea or AIDS.

For us the most important struggle is to be recognised as human beings. During the struggle prior to 1994 there were only two levels, two classes – the rich and the poor. Now after the election there are three classes – the poor, the middle class and the rich. The poor have been isolated from the middle class. We are becoming more poor and the rest are becoming more rich. We are on our own. We are completely on our own.

Our President Mbeki speaks politics – our Premier Ndebele, and Shilowa in Gauteng and Rasool in the Western Cape, our Mayor Mlaba and mayors all over the country speak politics. But who will speak about the genuine issues that affect the people every day – water, electricity, education, land, housing? We thought local government would minimise politics and focus on what people need but it all becomes politics.

We discovered that our municipality does not listen to us when we speak to them in Zulu. We tried English. Now we realise they won’t understood Xhosa or Sotho either. The only language that they understand is when we put thousands of people on the street. We have seen the results of this and we have been encouraged. It works very well. It is the only tool that we have to emancipate our people. Why should we stop it?

We have matured in our suffering. We had a programme to find a way forward. Our programme was to continue with the peaceful negotiations with the authorities that first started ten years ago. But our first plan was undermined. We were lied to. We had to come up with an alternative plan.

The 16th of February 2005 was the dawn of our struggle. On that day the Kennedy Road committee had a very successful meeting with the chair of the housing portfolio of the executive committee of the municipality, the director of housing and the ward councillor. They all promised us the vacant land on the Clare
Estate for housing. The land on Elf Road was one of the identified areas. But then we were betrayed by the most trusted people in our city. Just one month later, without any warning or explanation, bulldozers began digging the land. People were excited. They went to see what was happening and were shocked to be told that a brick factory was being built there. More people went down to see. There were so many of us that we were blocking the road. The man building the factory called the police and our local councillor, a man put into power by our votes and holding our trust and hopes. The councillor told the police, ‘Arrest these people, they are criminals’. The police beat us, their dogs bit us and they arrested 14 of us. We asked what happened to the promised land. We were told ‘Who the hell are you people to demand this land?’ This betrayal mobilised the people. The people who betrayed us are responsible for this movement. Those people are the second force.

Our movement started with 14 arrests – we called them the 14 heroes. Now we have 14 settlements united together as abahlali base mjondolo [shack dwellers]. Each settlement meets once a week and the leaders of all the settlements meet once a week. We are prepared to talk but if that doesn’t work we are prepared to use our strength. We will do what ever it costs us to get what we need to live safely.

We have learnt from our experience that when you want to achieve what you want, when you want to achieve what is legitimate by peaceful negotiations, by humbleness, by respecting those in authority your plea becomes criminal. You will be deceived for more than ten years, you will be fooled and undermined. This is why we have resorted to the streets. When we stand there in our thousands we are taken seriously.

The struggle that started in Kennedy Road was the beginning of a new era. We are aware of the strategies that the police are coming with to demoralise and threaten the poor. We don’t mind them building the jails for us and hiring more security if they are not prepared to listen to what we are saying. It is important for every shack dweller to know that we are aware of what is happening in Alexandra in Johannesburg, in P.E., in Cape Town. We know that our struggle is not by itself. We have sent our solidarity. We will not rest in peace until there is justice for the poor – not only in Kennedy Road; there are many Kennedy Roads, many Mhlengis, many poor voices that are not heard and not understood. But we have discovered the language that works. We will stick with it. The victims have spoken. We have said enough is enough.

It must be clear that this is not a political game. This movement is a kind of social tool by which the community hopes to get quicker results. This has nothing to do with politics or parties. Our members are part of every political organisation that you may think of. This is a non-political movement. It will finish its job when land and housing, electricity and basic services have been won and poverty eliminated. It is enough for us to be united until our people have achieved what is wanted – which is basic. But until that is materialised we will never stop.
The community has realised that voting for parties has not brought any change to us – especially at the level of local government elections. We can see some important changes at national level but at local level who ever wins the elections will be challenged by us. We have been betrayed by our own elected councillor. We have decided not to vote. The campaign that has begun – ‘No Land, No House, No Vote’ - is a campaign that has been agreed upon in all 14 settlements.

We are driven by the Third Force, the suffering of the poor. Our betrayers are the Second Force. The First Force was our struggle against apartheid. The Third Force will stop when the Fourth Force comes. The Fourth Force is land, housing, water, electricity, health care, education and work. We are only asking what is basic - not what is luxurious. This is the struggle of the poor. The time has come for the poor to show themselves that we can be poor in life but not in mind.

For us time has been a very good teacher. People have realised so many things. We have learnt from the past – we have suffered alone. That pain and suffering has taught us a lot. We have begun to realise that we are not supposed to be living under these conditions. There has been a dawn of democracy for the poor. No one else would have told us – neither our elected leaders nor any officials would have told us what we are entitled to. Even the Freedom Charter is only good in theory. It has nothing to do with the ordinary lives of the poor. It doesn’t help us. It is the thinking of the masses of the people that matters. We have noted that our country is rich. More airports are being built, there are more developments at the Point water front, more stadiums are being renovated, more money is floating around, even being lent to Mugabe. But when you ask for what is basic you are told that there is no money. It is clear that there is no money for the poor. The money is for the rich. We have come to the decision of saying ‘enough is enough’. We all agree that something must be done.

*S’bu Zikode is the elected chairman of the Abahlali baseMjondolo [Shack dwellers] movement.*