S’bu Zikode’s Transcribed Speech Made at the Centre for Civil Society Colloquium
March 4, 2006 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban

Amandla! Viva Abahlali baseMjondolo, viva! Viva CCS, Viva! Viva all the Social Movements, Viva! Viva Chatsworth, Viva! Viva Wentworth Viva! Viva the Right to Work Campaign Viva! Eeeh, Viva Patrick Bond, Viva!

Comrades! I am not used to sitting, I am not used to comfortable chairs; so don’t be taken aback that I will be standing. I am used to Zabalaza, to struggling; there’s no time to sleep and to be jolly with the comfortable chairs. Comrades, thank you very much to Patrick for this great opportunity that I have just been given to speak at this university on behalf of people from Abahlali. I am going to use this opportunity to talk about the pain and suffering we are facing with the hard of the hardest in our own country; the pain of arrests, beatings, detention and death.

Today comrades the question that many comrades have raised is the issue of two classes in our society: the high class and the lower class. Some people refer to the lower class as the middle class. And I think it is very unfair to call the poor of the poorest as the middle class. Fazel Khan, has already indicated that he has seven taps and a number of toilets. He also has a vehicle that he uses to move around. Therefore he cannot be compared to the person who has nothing, and this is why I think it is very unfair to refer to the lower class as the middle class.

Comrades, before I go to the “G” of the story, I would like just to share my experience with you. I have suffered a lot. For years I have tried the so called diplomacy. I have approached the high profile members of the ruling party, and tried to make deals, deals that will liberate you and I; deals that will answer the critical questions of access to basic rights like clean water, housing, sanitation, electricity, health care and education. But all in vain! In this democracy the poor are only used for voting. Once we have voted we are only lied to and undermined and ignored. So it is very critical that today we share the pain and suffering, the hard of the hardest, that we experience every day of our lives. I am going to talk about our level. We may be here at the university of the academics and students today, but we look like we are living in a different planet. In actual fact, we are living in the same planet, that is, the earth. But, we from Abahlali are living at the grass root level, where there is no one below us. We are the poor of the poorest. Our lives are the ignored truth of this society. Some of our people are doing the cleaning at this university. They also have important things to say.

Comrades, hearing all the speakers talking about the so called solidarity, it is clear to me that this solidarity is in fact “verbal solidarity.” For instance, where are other social movements when the Abahlali are facing the arrest and detention by the police? Where is COSATU, where are the other social movements, when we face police brutality, and when our children get burnt in the jondolos? Where is everyone when people with AIDS
have to share one toilet with a thousand people and stand in long queues for water? Where is everyone? Verbal solidarity! Comrades, lets be careful.

However, let me extend our gratitude to all comrades who worked with us for the success of the 27 of February 2006, where an extensive political drama was being played out in front of the whole country, and the High Court of South Africa ruled in favour of the Abahlali baseMjondolo, defending our right to express ourselves through marching against Sutcliffe’s attempts to ban us from marching. That was an important victory. Amandla!

Comrades, I am going to share with you the pain and suffering that we all go through, the pain and suffering in which we have no choice, except to fight back.

We who live in the jondolos of Durban, we democrats and loyal citizens of South Africa note that this country is rich because of the theft of our land and because of our work in the farms, mines, factories, kitchens, laundries of the rich. We cannot, and we will not, continue to suffer the way we do. Our voices cannot be stifled today like everyday. We brave heat, hunger, thirst, exhaustion and police repression. We have now had our day in court, we won recognition of our right to speak, we marched on the city, because now we are going to stand up for our rights, not only to speak, but to live, to breath, to eat, to sleep, to work in dignity and safety. Today we demand adequate land and housing to live in safety, healthy environment and with dignity. Today we demand the creation of well-paying and dignified jobs. Today we demand the right of all people in rented flats not to be evicted from their homes. Today we demand to genuine participation in genuine democratic processes so that we can make our own future. Today we demand safe and secure environments in which we can work, play and live. Today we demand that the fight against HIV and AIDS be given the seriousness it deserves. In view of this, today we demand well resourced and staffed health facilities.

Today we cannot afford electricity, and today we demand that these services be made free to all the poor. Today we live without toilets or clean water; therefore, today we demand access to these basic human rights. If we are not given what a human being needs to survive while the city builds casinos and stadiums and themeparks we will have no choice but to take it. Those big projects, those casinos, that make some few rich people richer are built with resources stolen from our future.

Today many people from around the city and the country are uniting in support of our struggle for genuine democracy and for basic human needs such as basic health care, clean water, electricity and housing. We would also like to give our support to our comrades involved in the same fight elsewhere. We have stood with, and we will continue to stand with our comrades in Chatsworth, Crossmore, Marianridge, Merebank, Shallcross, Clairwood and Wentworth in their fight against Ethekwini Municipality, in its attempt to evict them from their homes. We will also continue to stand with the people of South Durban in their struggle against the environmental racism, the poor students facing exclusion from technikons and universities, and with comrades all over the country fighting for land, housing, work, education, health care and democratic development. We
affirm that their struggle to resist evictions from their homes and win basic services is just. We also stand with our comrades in rural areas like eMandeni – we do not forget that rural areas are the biggest jondolo.

Today we demand answers. We have approached the municipality on many occasions and we have been promised that we will be allocated land, yet still we have no land. The municipality says it will house us. We demand to know when, we demand to know where, we demand to know how, we demand to know how many houses, we demand to know how long we have to be on the waiting list. We demand all this today.

We have fought and won, we have beaten Sutcliffe the city manager of Durban. Obed Mlabo, the Mayor of Durban, also tried to silence us but we would not go quietly. The police tied us up with helicopters and armoured cars and guns and we broke free and marches into the heart of the city. All around the city hall it was red that day. Today and everyday, until the government acts to the demand of the poor, we will raise our voices and we will fight for justice.

Comrades, while I am standing before you, in Umlazi, E Section, the day before yesterday, in the protest against the imposition of a councillor, against the repression of the freedom of the people and the will of the people, a twenty-three year old woman, Monica Ngcobo, was shot dead. The Abahlali baseMjondolo throughout the whole country are watching Umlazi, and because God has always been on the side of the poor, it is our hope that justice shall triumph. Although we have been badly beaten and shot in all the numerous marches that we have had, we have never experienced loss of life like what happened in Umlazi. Therefore we extend our condolences to the people of Umlazi, E Section and other comrades around the country as we mourn. We will march with them and stand with them. We know that this struggle will also be long. We will walk the road with the Umlazi comrades for as long as it must be walked.

Comrades what we need to share with you today is that there is much more that we can learn from one another. As I was posing the question, where was Patrick Bond when we buried our twelve-year old child who was burnt to death in the shacks? We need to ask, for how long shall we experience these kinds of abuse? That is why today we are saying, Sekwanel! Sekwanele! (Enough is enough!). Until our hands come together we shall not conquer. We need one another. What we can share today is that our masses speak volume, that we can only win the struggle if we unite; unity is what will liberate this country. Without unity there is no hope. But unity must be real. It cannot be created from the top. It must be created in the middle of the struggle of the poor. That is where we must do our discussing and thinking and strategising.

What we have learnt is that the government currently in power, cannot understand isiZulu nor can they hear any English. We have tried isiXhosa, they cannot understand isiXhosa. We have written letters, they the languages of pens, faxes and telephones. The only language that they can understand, guess what? Putting thousands of people on the streets. Amandla! It works, it worked for us, it may work for you. We must not waste time speaking languages that those high up don’t understand. Our people are dying
everyday. The queues for water get longer everyday. For the poor everyday is an emergency - every day.

So what we have learnt from our experiences is that our masses speak volumes. It is all about numbers, it’s all about masses; that’s where our strength lies. But our masses are not just bodies without land and houses and bodies marching on the street. We can be poor materially, but we are not poor in mind. This is why we have the University of Kennedy Road, the University of Foreman Road and the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo. Some of the intellectuals understand that we think our own struggle. Others still don’t understand this. Mlaba and Sutcliffe still don’t understand this. So comrades, today, I appeal to you, that what we need to do, as part of our way forward to conquer this capitalist system, (because each second you turn your head, the capitalist system is there) is to unite and think and fight together where there poor are, where the poor live, where the poor suffer. In your working environment, just like in mine, just like for all of us, there comes the capitalist system. We need to think about this carefully. Each tree we shake, we find that the capitalist system is there. It is already designed to direct you, to direct me, to direct us all so let us think well and fight bravely to overcome it. Amandla!

Comrades, even if those of us here from the communities come from different communities living in different places and with different histories, we all live at the grass root levels where we face electricity cut-offs, water disconnections, police brutality and so on. Peter Dwyer has spoken well about unemployment. He was talking about organizing the unorganized, organizing the unemployed people. Though many poor people have nobody to talk to or someone to listen to them, slowly the voice of the poor is getting louder and louder and it cannot be ignored. Slowly the unorganised are starting a big fight.

For the cause of the poor, Abahlali baseMjondolo has become the home for the homeless, the hope for the hopeless, the volume for the voices of the voiceless, both in rural areas and in the centre of big cities like Durban. There are many people who have no home, nobody to speak to and no one to listen to their plight. But we are here to make sure that the voices of the poor are heard and paid attention to. We are here to stand against injustice, against the inhumane attack on the poor.

So comrades, what I am going to suggest right now is that, since we are coming from different backgrounds, from different spectra of life and we have grown up in different environments, and from different walks of life, we should put all of those experiences and skills together. Putting that experience together will bring us something that is going to change this country into what we expect from liberation. We should not expect much right now, but we should focus on securing our basic needs first and build from there.

So comrades, without wasting any of your time, I would just like to share some strategic approaches and strategic ideas that one could adopt in order to proceed to fight injustice. Let us avoid extending SMS-solidarity, email solidarity and verbal solidarity. Instead let us fight side by side with each other. Let us face the police together. Let us think
together in the *jondolos* and on the streets. Some of the intellectuals are already doing this. Let us also follow the example of some of the comrades who, when they cannot afford to physically be wherever they are needed, they have extended whatever support they can, either in the form of financial or moral support. The Foundation for Human Rights and the Freedom of Expression Institute gave us weapons so that we could fight Mlaba and Sutcliffe better. Let us come together, let us put our heads together, and I promise, (like most of the speakers here have said, “united we stand”) that nothing shall conquer us if we stand together. But of course it is not the time to come and campaign about the movement and so on, the reality remains that people are suffering. So I would emphasise that we need to start working together and to start allowing each one of us to share their experiences and their ideas. Then we can build a movement that can really fight because it really grows from the people.

Our movement is home for the destitute, it is home for the hopeless, it is home for those who cannot afford anything, those who cannot afford to have their voices being heard anywhere else. So we should carefully and patiently give a chance to each one of us to express their experience and feelings knowing that some people are battling even to get a Rand to buy a tomato, to have their dinner. We must start by asking how we address the issues of day to day suffering? So comrades, it is time for us to say, enough is enough. Let us start implementing ideas, ideas that have been shared here.

All of the struggling communities here have very vibrant leaders who have stood in front of you during the time of darkness, happiness, threats of violence, threats of death, the hazards of detention and arrest. They will always stand for you. So what we therefore need to do is not for us to come and also stand in front of you and talk. You also need to be given a chance to say whatever you feel like. The only really clever thinking from a leader given trust by the poor, maybe like myself, maybe like yourself, is that instead of talking more, the leader should provide a platform for the people to talk. So let us therefore allow other people to share their experiences and ideas. Let us hear from everyone, especially those are not normally confident to speak in a place like this.

Thank you very much!