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People's Power, Land And Communities

By Mabhelandile Twani (July Movement)

The black working class has been facing a big challenge of housing, and most people have been applying for RDP houses. Since the 1980s many people have been on waiting lists, and the Department of Housing (DoH) has failed to address the housing question.

All the time the DoH makes excuses for not building the working class houses, informed by the South African government's neoliberal economic policies that are generally against the working class and the poor. These neoliberal policies inform cuts to government budgets, especially on social spending, including housing for poor people. The working class is therefore forced to find ways to build their own houses.

In 2011, Minister Lindiwe Sisulu said that government will be ending the RDP process of building houses. She said people should not rely on RDP houses and should buy their houses. Sisulu also confirmed that people under 40 years old who have been on the DoH's database for less than ten years are not going to be beneficiaries of the remaining RDP process. This is why the working class struggles to occupy open land spaces in places like Khayelitsha and other areas.

This article is a response to many reactionary organisations that have been negative towards the people's struggle. The Khayelitsha Human Settlement Forum (KHSF), in their article titled, "Shack Farming", argue that it will turn Khayelitsha into Africa's Colombia. They talk of illegal occupations, with the intention of renting and selling structures. But in contrast to the views of the KHSF, most people who are occupying land are people who have been renting housing in backyards owned by other people, and many have been on the housing waiting list for more than 20 years. The former back yarders are occupying the land.

The KHSF is a group of landlords, who are comfortable with the current system of people renting from their houses. Most of the Forum's members also own land that they took for their own selfish interests. Some KHSF members own about six to seven RDP houses in Khayelitsha and people are renting from them. Now they are defending their interests.

The people who are occupying the land have seen these open spaces vacant for more than 20 years. When people asked the City of Cape Town about plans for this land, they never got a clear answer. So there is no 'illegal occupation' or so-called 'land invasion', which the KHSF and the landlords keep claiming. This Forum is like the Khayelitsha Trust, which also claims to represent Khayelitsha but the people of Khayelitsha don't know anything about these opportunistic structures, which are not democratic or transparent.

When working class people stand up for their housing needs, opportunistic structures like the Forum side with the City of Cape Town because they have been benefiting from the city's tenders. There are also allegations of corruption. For instance, the Forum is fighting over the land that is next to the Khayelitsha Court, but currently the Khayelitsha Community Trust and Phaphamani Development Agency also want the same land.

Further, about five million people have been retrenched as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result many who have been renting have been evicted by landlords. The Forum is therefore not representing the working class in Khayelitsha with the City of Cape Town, they want to capture all the open land for their own interests. These are power-mongers, who sustain power by manipulating communities with false promises. Who cares if Khayelitsha is 'shack farming' and becoming like Colombia, who benefits if Khayelitsha is not a Colombia?

I support the efforts by communities to occupy the land. These open land spaces have been available for years, bearing the bodies of dead people from criminal activities. When people occupy all this open land, crime will be reduced. It is time now for people to take the land and to fight for housing when they get the land. The land question is historical, and must be challenged as such. I encourage the unity of struggles in all areas where people are occupying land, in Khayelitsha and beyond.

This article was submitted by Mabhelandile Twani, on behalf of the July Movement on 18 August 2020. You may republish this article, so long as you credit the authors and Karibu! Online (www.Karibu.org.za), and do not change the text. Please include a link back to the original article.