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# What should social work learn from 'the fire of social movements that burns at the heart of society'?<sup>1</sup>

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That social work should be 'on the side of the poor and the oppressed' in the context of the ubiquitous and increasingly pernicious consequences of global neoliberal capitalism, demands a differently engaged practice (Dominelli, 2004; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Reisch, 2013; Sewpaul, 2013). This requires 'greater system destabilising and social change efforts, and not the traditional social control and status-quo-maintaining functions of social work' (Sewpaul, 2013: 23). The struggles for social and economic justice waged by global and local social movements may therefore provide insights and impetus for such 'differently engaged' radical and transformative practice. This article explores the processes and strategies of two South African social movements and suggests that social work should incorporate some of the discourses of these movements for expansion of its theoretical base for transformation and social change.

**key words** social movements theory • South Africa

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## Introduction

That social work should be 'on the side of the poor and the oppressed' in the context of the ubiquitous and increasingly pernicious consequences of global neoliberal capitalism demands a differently engaged practice (Dominelli, 2004; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Reisch, 2013; Sewpaul, 2013). This requires 'greater system destabilising and social change efforts, and not the traditional social control and status-quo-maintaining functions of social work' (Sewpaul, 2013: 23). The struggles for social and economic justice waged by global and local social movements may therefore provide insights and impetus for such 'differently engaged' radical and transformative practice. Similarly, it is argued that, as a form of collective action, social work has been profoundly affected by its contact with and shares many of the characteristics of social movements (Thompson, 2002; Ferguson, 2008; Reisch, 2013).

This article argues that the 'master narrative of social work which accommodates to neoliberalism' (Reisch, 2013) and hegemonic discourses of status-quo maintenance and social control must be interrogated and challenged through progressive social work theory. In searching for counter-hegemonic discourses, theories of social movements' processes and structures provide such alternatives for thinking about transformative

1 social change in social work. As argued by Mullaly (2001: 304), progressive social  
2 work shows how social work practices ‘covered up many of the exploitative and  
3 oppressive features of capitalism by helping people cope with or adjust to capitalism’.

4 The historical and current struggles of South African social movements for social  
5 change are regarded as important instances of challenging the prevailing status quo  
6 (Ballard et al, 2006; McKinley, 2006; Gibson, 2011) and therefore offer important  
7 discourses for social work. This article describes a qualitative research study undertaken  
8 with two South African social movements to explore their principles, processes and  
9 strategies. Findings derived from thematic analysis are compared and contrasted  
10 with traditional social work and community work theory, in order to contribute  
11 to counter-hegemonic social work discourses around processes for social change.

## 12 13 **Post-apartheid South Africa**

14  
15 The South African transition from a racist dictatorship to a non-racial democracy is a  
16 symbol of hope for the success of the struggles of social movements. The South African  
17 anti-apartheid social movements had made a global impact and ‘played a part in the  
18 emergence of a global civil society during the post-war era and was one of the most  
19 important historical predecessors of the global justice movement’ (Thorn, 2007: 911).

20 However, while the political transformation may be regarded  
21 as having been a victory for the struggle of anti-apartheid liberation movements, the  
22 revolution failed to achieve a socioeconomic transformation of society.

23 Twenty years on, South Africa is regarded as one of the most unequal countries in  
24 the world, characterised by landlessness and ongoing racial stratification of poverty  
25 (Bond, 2005; Ballard et al, 2006; Barret, 2006; May and Meth, 2007; Beinart and  
26 Dawson, 2010; Terreblanche, 2012). It is ironic that social struggle in South Africa has  
27 increased since the early 1990s and the transition from Apartheid as ‘the euphoria of  
28 the political transition led many to expect that the need for adversarial social struggle  
29 with the state was over’ (Ballard et al, 2006: 1).

30  
31 In spite of the socialist programme of the African  
32 National Congress (ANC), contained in the 1955 Freedom Charter, the negotiated  
33 ‘settlement’ in the 1990s led to a bourgeois democracy, which protected the interests of  
34 capital and ensured the creation of a ‘black’ elite in order to ‘de-racialise’ the economy  
35 (Bond, 2005; Barret, 2006; McKinley, 2006). The Freedom Charter receded from  
36 political consciousness very soon after the ANC came to power in 1994, with its  
37 commitments to neoliberal macroeconomic policy (Bond, 2005). The ideological shift  
38 from a socialist and redistributive approach (the Reconstruction and Development  
39 Programme – RDP – **which ran for six years** towards the  
40 American ideologies of ‘neoliberal globalism and market fundamentalism, were so  
41 radical that all kinds of “unholiness” must have taken place behind the scenes during  
42 those six years’ (Terreblanche, 2012: 63).

43 However, the two-fold trajectory of the liberation struggle in South Africa was a  
44 ‘false dichotomy between the political and socioeconomic “sides” of revolutionary  
45 struggle’ (McKinley, 2006: 413). One was the revolutionary seizure of political power  
46 regarded as essential for the creation of a new state form and movement forward,  
47 while the other was to be achieved through the exercise of that political power for  
48 the transformation of the socioeconomic (Slovo, 1976, cited in McKinley, 2006: 413).

1 According to Terreblanche (2012: 111), since the democratic transition in  
2 1994, South Africa has 'experienced an American-led neo-liberal transition that  
3 empowered the capitalist/corporatist "side" of our dual system to orchestrate even  
4 greater inequalities in the distribution of South Africa's domestic income'. Levels of  
5 inequality between wealthy and poor people remain among the highest in the world.  
6 In 2008, the wealthiest 25% of South Africans received 75% of the total income  
7 while the poorest 35% received less than 8% of the income (Leibrandt et al, 2011).

## 9 **Role of social movements in the current South Africa**

11 South Africa is described as the 'protest capital of the world' (Kota, 2011, cited  
12 in Dawson and Sinwell, 2012: 3). Such new social  
13 movements in South Africa, which began providing a 'non-institutional space in  
14 which activists could contest the legitimacy of the ANC and fight against the effects  
15 of neo-liberalism' (Dawson and Sinwell, 2012: 3), include:

- 17 • Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) (the 'shackdwellers' movement');
- 18 • the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF);
- 19 • the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC);
- 20 • the Landless People's Movement (LPM).

22 However, it may be argued that the struggles of social movements in South Africa  
23 have occurred separately from those of organised labour, which have until recently  
24 all been aligned with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)  
25 (being one of the three sectors forming what is known as the 'tripartite alliance'  
26 with the ruling ANC and the South African Communist Party), and have therefore  
27 remained partial and isolated. Sinwell and Dawson

28 (2012: 3) furthermore argue that in South Africa, the theorising  
29 of scholarship attendant to social movements has largely excluded organised labour,  
30 which has tended to preclude 'significant engagement between community based  
31 and workplace struggles'. This has recently changed, with the breakaway of one of  
32 the most significant trade unions – the National Union of Metalworkers of South  
33 Africa (NUMSA) – from COSATU. This shift has opened opportunities for a new  
34 'united front' (Pillay, 2014; Suttner, 2014).

35 In spite of the disconnect between social movements and organised labour as  
36 described above, Alexander and Pfaffe (2014) argue that there is little distinction  
37 between poor and working-class people. They argue that while there is social distance  
38 between poor people and workers, it is unhelpful to explain this distinction through  
39 a theory of class separation. In post-apartheid South Africa, the losses of labour as  
40 a social actor resulting from the demand by capital for marketisation has meant that  
41 increasing numbers of workers have become casual labour (Ballard et al, 2006) and  
42 have therefore become active in social movements.

43 In recent years, there has been a great increase in levels of dissatisfaction and  
44 resistance to the severe levels of poverty and inequality evident in the country. In  
45 the years 2009-12 there were more than 1,000 'unrest-related incidents' recorded by  
46 the police. Although the popular media tends to describe these as 'service delivery  
47 protests', Alexander and Pfaff (2014: 63) argue that 'many of these events amount  
48 to local insurrections, and the movement as a whole can be described as a rebellion

1 of the poor'. As stated by the leader of Abahlali baseMjondolo, '[f]reedom has been  
2 privatised and we have a long way to go to get democracy' (Zikode, 2013).

3 There should, however, be a more nuanced understanding of the role of social  
4 movements in South Africa after the transition to democracy. Four themes may  
5 be identified that provide such an understanding (Anciano, 2013: 143).

6 The first of these relates to challenging 'hegemonic political  
7 and socio-economic discourse that defines the prevailing status quo' (Ballard et al,  
8 2006:

9 'creating a new workers' state' (Ngwane, 2006) to  
10 challenging 'existing power relations' without casting this as a 'political revolutionary  
11 project' (Greenstein, 2003).

12 The second theme  
relates to the explicit and progressive nature of economic and political agendas. It  
13 is argued that social movements were formed around politics of redistribution with  
14 the explicit aim of mobilising people living in poverty against neoliberal economic  
15 policy. Mobilisation around identity issues is seen to be superseded by socioeconomic  
16 concerns. The third theme is about 'the potential to generate mass mobilisation and  
17 support' (Anciano, 2013: 144). 'Like-minded' social movements therefore needed  
18 to be linked together to form large sources of mobilisation and pressure. The final  
19 theme is around democracy and the influence of social movements on democratic  
20 change and extending the 'notion of rights to the socioeconomic sphere'

## 22 Social movements: descriptions and characteristics

23  
24 Social movements are a form of 'contentious politics' (Barker et al, 2013: 4), which  
25 through collective activity embody the agency of actors to change history. Individuals  
26 acting alone possess little capacity to transform social relations, but 'collective activity  
27 and organisation contain the potential both to make immediate gains, to roll back  
28 some of the most exigent threats to human welfare but also to lay the foundations  
29 of other ways of living and organizing society' (Barker et al, 2013: 13). The system,  
30 against which protests are most often pitched, therefore, is that of class and its power  
31 base (Cox, 2011; Barker et al, 2013). The current increase in social movement activity  
32 globally is viewed as an 'upswing in a cycle of contention', generated and driven by  
33 the global capitalist order (Barker et al, 2013: 2).

34 Social movements are defined as the organisation of multiple forms of materially  
35 grounded and locally generated, skilled activity, around a rationality, expressed and  
36 organised by (would-be) hegemonic actors, and against the hegemonic projects  
37 articulated by other such actors (Cox, 2011: 86). Social movements may also be seen  
38 as rational attempts by excluded groups 'to mobilise sufficient political leverage to  
39 advance political interests through noninstitutionalised means' and it is the structural  
40 power of the various political-economic structures in which they are involved  
41 that gives such excluded groups 'insurgent potential' (McAdam, 1982: 37). The  
42 activities of social movements arise from 'the daily experience of people that shapes  
43 their grievances, that establishes the measure of their demands and points out the  
44 targets of their anger' (Nilsen and Cox, 2013: 73). However, these are not isolated  
45 frustrations but rather clues to underlying structures and relationships that become  
46 evident through these events (Nilsen and Cox, 2013).

47 It may be argued that there are specific circumstances necessary for the emergence  
48 of social movements. These include opportunities for collective social action, which

1 vary over time. These account for shifts in the 'structure of political opportunities'.  
2 Changes occur among previously 'quiescent groups' but also in the political system  
3 itself, which includes any process or event that undermines the way in which the  
4 political system is structured, such as 'war, industrialisation, international political  
5 realignment, prolonged unemployment, and widespread demographic changes'  
6 (McAdam, 1987: 41).

7 However, in the context of political opportunity and widespread discontent there  
8 still remains the need for centralised direction and coordination by a recognised  
9 leadership (McAdam, 1987: 47).

10 Barker et al (2001: 2) address the arguments around spontaneity from below  
11 versus leadership and organisation with the 'Gramscian observation (1971) that pure  
12 spontaneity never exists for there are always leaders and initiators even if many remain  
13 nameless figures who leave few traces in historical records'.

14 Social movements are a political rather than psychological phenomenon, however,  
15 there is an important interplay between these dimensions in their development.  
16 As social conditions become untenable, 'mass political impotence' may stem from  
17 shared perceptions of powerlessness. The 'transformation of consciousness' is crucial  
18 for mobilisation and insurgency. It is not enough therefore to have only 'structural  
19 potential' in a social movement; there is also a need for 'cognitive liberation' (McAdam,  
20 1987: 48).

21 People must 'collectively define their circumstances as unjust  
22 and subject to change through group action'. This 'transformation of consciousness'  
23 needs to occur among a significant section of the aggrieved population. A 'favourable  
24 confluence of three sets  
25 of factors, together with cognitive transformation therefore leads to the ascendance of  
26 social movements: 'broad socio-economic processes; expanding political opportunities  
27 and indigenous organizational strength' (McAdam, 1987: 49).

28 Tilly (2006) describes the essential characteristics of successful social movements  
29 as being:

- 30 • worthiness;
- 31 • unity;
- 32 • numbers;
- 33 • commitment.

34  
35 There is of necessity:

- 36
- 37 • physical assembly;
- 38 • a shared and mutual focus of attention;
- 39 • solidarity;
- 40 • emotional energy;
- 41 • symbols and emblems;
- 42 • morality;
- 43 • commitment to the cause.
- 44

45 Social movements may also be seen as a form of 'contentious politics', which include  
46 sustained, organised public efforts and campaigns, with a specific repertoire. The  
47 repertoires of struggle of social movements include marches, rallies and protests (Tilly,  
48 2006: 53). At the centre, however, of every highly mobilised social movement is

1 what Durkheim called 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], cited in  
 2 Collins, 2001: 27), also described as an experience that is exhilarating and transforming  
 3 (Cox, 2011: 100). In keeping with these descriptions, Haiven and Khasnabish (2014)  
 4 describe the radical imagination that builds 'shared imaginative landscapes' around  
 5 what is possible. Social movements should therefore foster debates and dialogue,  
 6 which 'refine shared visions' and lead to action that challenges reigning paradigms.

## 8 **Social movements, reform or revolution?**

10 The extent of social change to be achieved by social movements is linked to whether  
 11 'actors' in social movements aim to achieve revolutionary change or incremental  
 12 reforms to oppressive social conditions. These objectives may be linked to the  
 13 ideological position of these 'actors' and may range, as discussed previously, from  
 14 'creating a new workers' state' (Ngwane, 2006) to challenging 'existing power relations'  
 15 without casting this as a 'political revolutionary project' (Greenstein, 2003).

16 Whether the achievement of reforms rather than extensive  
 17 revolutionary change should be the aim of social movements, is therefore contested.

18 The achievement of reforms should be viewed within the context of a broader  
 19 revolutionary project for societal transformation. As argued by Ferguson (2014:  
 20 unpaginated) about the importance of pressure on the ruling class from below, 'the  
 21 key role that such struggles play in building working class self-confidence and self-  
 22 organisation is why Rosa Luxemburg

23 insisted that revolutionaries should  
 24 be the best fighters for reforms'. The achievements gained through working towards  
 25 reform are therefore seen as important, as 'reformism of one form or another is the  
 26 initial common sense starting point of most social movements; it is the flipside to  
 27 the more normal forms of apathy that characterise the standpoint of the individual  
 28 within civil society' (Blackledge, 2014: 11). Because movements develop and grow  
 29 and because they can involve large collectives of people, they are able to create a  
 30 space within which revolutionary politics can become a real force within society  
 31 (Blackledge, 2014).

32 Barker et al (2013: 2) cite Katsiafikas (1987) and argue that the present time is  
 33 increasingly starting to look like one of those decisive moments in history when 'a  
 34 chain reaction of insurrections and revolts give[s] rise to new forms of power ... in  
 35 opposition to the established order, and new visions of the meaning of freedom are  
 36 formulated in the actions of millions of people'.

37 Social movements must therefore find ways to balance the aims of revolutionary  
 38 change and reform of oppressive structures. McAdam (1987: 58) argues  
 39 that revolutionary, fundamental challenges to the existing political and economic  
 40 structures of society or reform goals (seen to be piecemeal reform of those structures)  
 41 must both be considered. The social movement must 'chart a course that avoids  
 42 crippling repression on the one hand and tactical impotence on the other ... staking  
 43 this optimal middle ground is exceedingly difficult, yet failing to do so almost surely  
 44 spells the demise of the movement' (1987: 58).

1 **Social work and its contradictions**

2  
3 In spite of definitions of social work as a social justice profession (Sewpaul and Jones,  
4 2004), hegemonic discourse positions it as individualist,  
5 reformist and pursuing status-quo maintenance and social control (Payne, 2005;  
6 Sewpaul, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Murray and Hick, 2013; Smith, 2013).

7 Social work finds itself in a contradictory position  
8 within the capitalist era. It participates in meeting the needs of the capitalist state to  
9 ensure the reproduction of labour power, to mould the working class to serve the  
10 needs of capital and also to avoid pressure from the working class from below, on the  
11 ruling class (Ferguson, 2014). Social workers have furthermore, over the years and  
12 based on assumptions that the state would deal with social consequences of structural  
13 problems, entered into a 'cautious co-operation with the state' (Reisch, 2013: 68).

14 The 'master narrative' of social work 'accommodates to neoliberal discourse', and  
15 also exalts social change while working towards adaptation to toxic socioeconomic  
16 conditions. Counter-narratives (or counter hegemonic discourse) are therefore  
17 silenced or marginalised as a consequence of the need for 'the logic of narrative  
18 coherence' (Reisch, 2013: 73).

19 However, from its inception, social work was linked with other social movements  
20 such as labour, feminism, socialism and civil rights. It provided support for groups  
21 that reflected the collective voice of people, empowered people and gave them the  
22 opportunity to exercise their agency (Reisch and Andrews, 2001). Its proponents  
23 recognised that conflict is an inevitable part of social change efforts, that politics  
24 and practice are inseparable and that social work practice and social work education  
25 are arenas for ongoing struggle. Social workers need to reassert this heritage today  
26 because it reflects an alternate view of the future and the process of change, and not  
27 merely a form of self-protection.

28 Counter-narratives of social work emerged in the new radical approaches during the  
29 1970s (Bailey and Brake, 1970 ; Alinsky, 1971; Reisch  
30 and Andrews, 2001; Ferguson and Woodward, 2009 ).  
31 Radical approaches have also gained credence in recent times, with a resurgence of  
32 attention to critical theory (Payne, 2005; Ferguson and Woodward, 2009; Lavalette,  
33 2012; Reisch, 2013; Webb and Gray, 2013 ). Models  
34 of community organisation (which include locality development, social planning  
35 and social action), advocacy and Freirian approaches have also existed since the early  
36 history of social work (Cox et al, 1987).

37 Renewed arguments have been made for radical efforts in social work, if it is to  
38 reclaim its status as a social justice profession and reject status-quo maintenance  
39 and acquiescence to neoliberal capitalism (Lavalette, 2012; Reisch, 2013; Sewpaul,  
40 2013). This also implies a need for a new collectivism in social work (Ferguson and  
41 Lavalette, 2013). The processes, strategies and theories underlying social movements  
42 as a form of contentious politics for social change and transformation, offer a counter-  
43 hegemony and discourse for social workers interested in the pursuit of social justice  
44 and social change.



## Research study: learnings for social work from Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Anti-Eviction Campaign

The author conducted a qualitative study during 2012, to explore the processes, strategies and organisational aspects of two South African social movements. Specific objectives of the study included:

- to explore how such social movements contribute to social change and transformation, especially in relation to the realisation of socioeconomic and social welfare rights and how these achievements correlate with the aims of social work;
- to explore the processes of formation, growth, organisation and functioning;
- to investigate the factors contributing to successes and failures in social movements;
- to contribute to the discourse on progressive social work around social justice and social change issues;
- to explore how the activities and nature of social movements relating to structural change may contribute to indigenisation and radical discourse for social work knowledge development.

The two social movements concerned have grown since the early 2000s in the face of oppressive and unequal social conditions and in spite of the 1996 Constitution of South Africa, which includes one of the most progressive Bill of Rights in the world. The first of these social movements – Abahlali baseMjondolo – grew from the conditions relating to the absence of housing, squalid living conditions and lack of electricity, in an informal settlement area in Durban, Kwazulu Natal. This ‘shackdwellers’ movement’ soon became a significant force in South African politics of contention, mobilising thousands of participants through local ‘township’ organisations. In the face of severe repression and brutality, they have successfully challenged laws, attained security of tenure and developed international links and networks. The second social movement – the Anti-Eviction Campaign – is an organisation in the Western Cape, which has successfully mobilised thousands of citizens who have been evicted from their homes, organising protests, mobilising support and solidarity and offering legal and emergency interventions for people in crisis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants in Durban and Cape Town, with Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC). These conversations were recorded and transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis. Themes were identified using a deductive and inductive approach, thus adopting both theory-driven and data-driven identification of themes. These themes were compared and contrasted with traditional and collective social work intervention processes in order to expand on social work discourse for social justice and social change.

## Results

The transcripts of the in-depth-interviews containing the reflections, ideas and descriptions were thematically analysed and provided insight into aspects such as the formation, characterisation, organisation, structure, programmes, principles and processes of the respective social movements. These were described by the participants from the two movements (both initially founded around issues relating to housing

1 and living conditions) in similar ways. The themes provide social work with valuable  
2 discourses to expand its radical and critical approaches.  
3

### 4 *Formation*

5  
6 The formation of the movements had been driven by the dehumanisation of poverty,  
7 the unjust conditions in which the people found themselves and from a sense of  
8 anger, frustration, alienation and exclusion. The long-anticipated transformation of  
9 South African society had occurred in the realm of the ideal and the political rather  
10 than the material:  
11

12 'Our own people were hoping that the government of the day is about to  
13 re-dress the imbalances of the past, because when it comes to imbalances  
14 of the past, that's where the root cause of the problem is. Because within  
15 that imbalances of the past, or imbalances of the current, that is – there is  
16 no difference.'

17  
18  
19 'When we started this thing it was very, it was out of anger and frustration  
20 and sporadic road blockades.'

21  
22 'What makes people make noise more and more and more, because they  
23 go to bed without food, and it's raining now, our own people's houses are  
24 getting wet, just like I stay in a shack, when its weather like this I'm also  
25 worried, I have to put a bucket somewhere to save my bed from getting  
26 wet, it's everyday day life.'

27  
28 'So many of us felt that we were not part of a society, we felt that we were  
29 treated outside of what normal society should be treated.'

30  
31 McAdam (1982) described the ascendance of social movements as resulting from  
32 the favourable confluence of broad socioeconomic processes, political opportunities  
33 and indigenous organisational strength together with cognitive transformation. It is  
34 often excluded groups that mobilise political leverage to advance political interests  
35 through non-institutionalised means.

36 In the present study, although there had seemed to be early spontaneous formation  
37 around the common conditions in which people found themselves, prevailing  
38 conditions began to shape people's grievances, demands and targets of their anger  
39 (Nilsen and Cox, 2013). Collective action was planned

40 and solidarity grew. However, collective action was met with violent repression.  
41 Through these events, even greater organisation and disciplined leadership emerged:  
42

43 'There were no individuals that sat around the table as such, and then none  
44 of us knew that this movement will, in fact we were not even aware that  
45 we were building a movement.'

46  
47 'So the very same spontaneous march again was dispersed with a barrel of  
48 guns when we were half way to the police station.'

1 'But then what became different with our movement was the way we turned  
2 from protesting into a social movement, because we ... were putting like ten  
3 thousands of people on the streets.' (1,29)

4  
5 Similarly, Barker et al (2002) argue that there are always  
6 leaders and initiators that organise and mobilise in spite of perceptions that there  
7 may be pure spontaneity from below. It seems that it was solidarity and the 'radical  
8 imagination' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014), combined with the struggle of prevailing  
9 socioeconomic conditions, political opportunities and indigenous organisational  
10 strength (McAdam, 1982), that contributed to the growth and development of these  
11 very strong social movements.

### 12 13 *Goals, radical imagination and political consciousness*

14  
15 There was clarity and understanding about goals being related not only to immediate  
16 and specific issues, but also to broader socioeconomic change and transformation.  
17 The movements had formed around the struggle and consciousness of oppression and  
18 injustice and in the process of convening collective action, there was an increasing  
19 awareness of the nature of structural dynamics. The shift in consciousness occurred  
20 as the movements organised and provided space for collective action.

21  
22 'That is why we opt for a socialist kind of government because we are  
23 talking about a bottom-to-top approach because that's how we can be able  
24 to re-dress the imbalances of the past.'

25  
26 'That's where we can be able to see the light, then people can be able to  
27 walk freely without any intimidation, without any fear and the people can  
28 live normal lives.'

29  
30 'It was on technical grounds that the land was unsuitable, it was too  
31 dangerous, the gas supplies, all these technical excuses that made sense. But  
32 again, the question that became political was that – you are in the middle class,  
33 in the homes just across the road, so what's wrong with this picture.'

34  
35 'That's where normal life will start beginning, because now as we are moving  
36 after 1994, we, our own people as black government just came in where  
37 the white minority just left off in terms of governance you know.'

38  
39 As described by Haiven and Khasnabish (2014), social movements tend to 'convoke'  
40 the radical imagination. As collective action occurred and people were exposed to  
41 political education, a more radical consciousness developed.

### 42 43 *Principles, nature and characteristics*

44  
45 There was a consistent reporting of respect, democracy, participation and inclusivity  
46 among the interviewees. Members and the leadership of the movements were guided  
47 by commitment and hard work, seeing what they do as sacrifice. These principles,  
48 together with ongoing political education, increased critical conscientisation (Freire,

1970), and collective action, providing the means towards humanisation.

'Don't talk about us, talk to us.'

'So to me what I'm doing, I grew up with this you know, it's in my blood.'

'When it comes to our situation, it's day and night, day and night. I've been fighting with my family all the time because sometimes when I have to go home I go home maybe 12, midnight or quarter to one in the morning.'

'There's no top-down approach, we don't say what you need to discuss, how you discuss, and it's up to the leader of the community and the local committee.'

### *Strategies and programmes*

Interventions and activities tended at some times to be at a policy level and at others at a basic material level and in some instances, achieving structural change. This was especially the case when support was received from socioeconomic rights and legal institutions around the constitutionality of specific laws such as the Slums Act.

Although mainly reformist, these achievements may be seen as important instances of pressure from below on the ruling class and of building confidence among the working class (Ferguson, 2014). Further, the animation and energy required for such achievements begin to counter apathy (Blackledge, 2014) and the culture of silence common among oppressed people (Freire, 1970):

'Obviously we were tackling issues of housing mainly at that time, but again, now the movement is really looking at the issues of living and less to do with service delivery, that's why we are not comfortable when the media and political analysts refer to the protest as service delivery protests because we feel that it narrows and it kind of reduces what is so important to us, which is dignity.'

'We actually have a year calendar, we have a year programme, it's so strategic in a sense that it demands you as a member to take responsibility but it also disciplines you.'

'If you had to ask some of our successes you know, at a policy level, at ah ... you know how we dealt with the Slums Act.'

'If you are a victim of an eviction, if you are a victim, of water cut-offs, a victim of education, of health you know, you are automatically a member you know because that's how we view – you becomes the member.'

1 For people living in the South African context with its history of apartheid and  
2 colonial oppression and ongoing extreme poverty, the organisational aspects, principles  
3 and characteristics of social movements offer alternative structural arrangements and  
4 means of achieving humanisation. As stated by Haiven and Khasnabish (2014), the  
5 'radical imagination' is far more than merely understanding how power works or  
6 imagining a new society. It is about transforming social relationships and building  
7 alternative social structures.

### 8 9 *Comparison of social movements with social work processes* 10

11 The more radical approach in social work, and specifically in macro practice, is that  
12 of 'social action' (Cox et al, 1987). It is therefore useful to contrast this approach  
13 with traditional social work and with social movement strategies and approaches  
14 (see Table 1). Social movement approaches then give social work a more radical  
15 perspective for social change and provide discourse for incorporation into social  
16 work knowledge and practice.

17 The conservative nature of traditional social work in its status-quo maintenance  
18 and social control forms (Harms Smith, 2013), is strongly contrasted with the nature  
19 and processes of social movements. Social action, as a form of macro practice or  
20 community work intervention, is more closely aligned to the themes identified in  
21 the processes of social movements. It is in these comparisons that the contradictions  
22 within social work are evident, with divergent goals, theories, ideologies and  
23 intervention programmes.

### 24 25 **Conclusion** 26

27 As social work increases the pursuit of its mandate to seek and work for social justice,  
28 rather than serving the interests of the capitalist state by exercising social control and  
29 maintaining the status quo, counter-hegemonic discourse and theory must continue  
30 to emerge. As it seeks to intensify its 'system destabilising and social change efforts',  
31 the 'fire that burns at the heart of society', in the form of social movements, provides  
32 insights and discourse for such processes of social change. While extensive theory  
33 relating to social movements exists, social work has tended to neglect this source of  
34 theorising for its more progressive and radical strategies for social change. Exploring  
35 the goals, theory, principles, strategies, structural arrangements, politics, social work  
36 theory and potential roles of the social worker in social movements, specifically  
37 in the South African context, this article shows how social work may expand its  
38 discourse and knowledge for social change and transformation. Two South African  
39 social movements, namely Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Anti-Eviction Campaign,  
40 are examples of established and enduring social movements. They provide important  
41 descriptions of processes, methodologies and 'contentious politics' in action, for the  
42 expansion of social work theory both at a local and at an international level.

**Table 1: Comparison: social movements, social action and traditional social work**

Category	Social movements	Social action	Traditional social work
Formation	Precipitating social conditions	Social issues, disadvantage, injustice, human rights violations	Needs, institutional shortcomings
Principles	Participation, dignity, sacrifice, democracy, discipline, solidarity, fairness, collectivity	Social justice, rights-based, participation	Respect, person-centred, self-determination, non-judgemental
Theory, ideology	Marxist, socialist-collectivist, revolutionary change, anti-colonialist, structural class analysis	Socialist-collectivist, human rights and social justice, anti-oppressive practice, Freirian approaches, structural and agency focus	Developmental, institutional reformist, liberal, rational economic, agency above structural focus, eco-systemic, strengths
Structure and organisation	Strong leadership, membership, organised, disciplined, democratic	Organised, democratic, participative, spontaneous	Service provider and client/service user, needs based
Goals	Radically transformed society, alternative social structures,	Social justice and human rights realisation	Adaptation, wellbeing, coping, enhanced social functioning
Strategies for change	Mobilisation, coercive, challenging, insurgence, struggle and resistance, adversarial	Needs based, conscientisation, mobilisation, conflictual or consensual, cooperative or adversarial	Problem identification, rational planning, institutional change, dialogue, consensual, cooperative
Assumptions about society	Structural oppression, asymmetrical power relations, class struggle, alienation, contradictions in capitalism	Disadvantaged populations, social injustice, inequality and deprivation	Substantive social problems, inequality, disadvantage, deficits and/or strengths, individualist
Programmes and activities	Mobilisation, political education, protest and collective action, alliance formation, emergency responses, legal action	Organisation, liberatory education, conscientisation, collective action, consensus or conflictual	Micro/meso/macro interventions, education, various therapeutic approaches, problem-solving approach, change process
Role of social worker	Participant, member, collaborator, resource, activist	Organiser, facilitator, educator, activist	Therapist, care manager, community worker, development worker, entrepreneur
Social work knowledge constitutive of social change	Revolutionary and radical, critical approaches, transformative approaches	Institutional and societal reformist, transformative, critical, radical, anti-oppressive, anti-racist	Oppressive, domesticating, social control, status-quo maintenance, reformist

**Note**

<sup>1</sup> Taken from the title of a paper by Nilsen, AG, Cox, L, 2005, At the heart of society burns the fire of social movements: what would a Marxist theory of social movements look like?, in C. Barker and M. Tyldesley (eds) *Tenth international conference on alternative futures and popular protest: A selection of papers from the conference*, Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University.

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