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Lekhetho Mtetwa, "The Landless People's Movement Fights for the People's Rights," 29–30 September 2013

The Landless People's Movement (LPM) was formed in 2001, much of the initial impetus coming from an NGO body called the National Land Committee (NLC). Although affiliated to Via Campesina, and linked to the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, its activity has centred on the struggles of urban squatter communities, rather than on agrarian issues, farm occupations or organising alternative production systems. In 2004, LPM supporters protested

the national elections declaring “No Land! No Vote!” In 2008, the Gauteng province-based LPM sections (now the main LPM affiliates) formed the Poor People’s Alliance with the squatters’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Rural Network / Abahlali basePlasini (both in KwaZulu-Natal), and the Anti-Eviction Campaign (in the Western Cape). The Poor People’s Alliance also took an anti-electoral position.

In the texts provided below, Lekhetho Mtetwa, an activist in the LPM in Protea South in Soweto, and a member of the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front (ZACF), discusses the struggles of the LPM. Mtetwa was, at the time, LPM secretary in Protea South. It is important to note that by 2013 the LPM in Protea South in Soweto was the main LPM affiliate. Since Mtetwa’s comments were made, this section has faced notable challenges. In 2010, a founder member and office-bearer sought to use the LPM to support her running for municipal office on a Democratic Alliance (DA)-linked ticket. This was defeated by Mtetwa and others, but a long-term schism resulted. From 2014, many in LPM-Protea South were (successfully) wooed by the new Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party: Mtetwa resigned in protest. Despite some subsequent disillusion in EFF, following the 2014 national elections, the section has not fully revived. It seems likely that it will be replaced by a branch of Abahlali baseMjondolo.

Sources: Two texts are provided below.

The first is a lightly edited transcript of an introduction to the LPM that Mtetwa gave on the 29 September 2013, at the “Politics at a Distance from the State” conference at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. The second text is an interview with Mtetwa, at the same event, by Lucien van der Walt, on 30 September.

Lekhetho Mtetwa: the Landless People’s Movement fights for the people’s rights

I am from the Landless People’s Movement (LPM), a movement that engages the people on land issues. People have been protesting for their right to land, while the state is trying to privatise and control land, and also push shack-dwellers away from the cities. The eviction of people is ongoing, so we fight for the “right to the city,” and for the right to land and housing. Another issue we address is unemployment: land is not enough. The workers and the unemployed should occupy factories and workplaces, so that we can have jobs and meet our needs.

What does the word “state” mean? The state rests on violence against the working class.

At election times, politicians make empty promises, but after the elections they deploy violence against us, the working class. Our structures have been attacked by police and by vigilantes. In 2004, we had comrades who were arrested and tortured when they campaigned at election time, saying “No Land! No Vote!” In 2007, on the 3rd September, we were barricading roads, and we lost one comrade: he was knocked over by a van that rode away. The police attacked us, although we were exercising and demanding our rights.

I am involved in the LPM in Protea South, Soweto, where we are shack-dwellers. The state wants to remove all the shack dwellers, and to then use the land for houses for other people. This is a major issue that we are fighting. Forced removals are what we are facing. Housing is what we want: to be housed properly.

We also face a lack of consultation from our so-called elected municipal councillors: they do things, without consulting the community. The politicians rely on the votes of our grandparents: they use them to get elected, promising this and that to get at the end of the day more votes.

These are the problems that we are facing. To organise and fight for the things I have mentioned, we as LPM Protea South usually have a protest march or barricade the streets, so we can be seen by the state as fighting for our demands. Normally we make it a point that no-one from our community goes to work during the protests. There are shops in our area: we make it a point that no-one opens on that day also.

If each and every person joins the struggle, we can make changes. We need to fight the struggle together: even fighting for our rights in Protea South is not only a fight for LPM members only, but for everyone who lives in in this community and in this world. We are fighting for everyone who needs land and freedom.

All social movements should organise all the ordinary people to take direct action to defeat the state and the capitalists. If we always talk and talk without action, we are like an empty vessel. We need to be creative, and I push the idea of a poor people's summit, to build for big day of action and to allow struggles to be linked up.

Lekhetho Mtetwa: rebuilding the Landless People's Movement from below

Lucien van der Walt (LvdW): Thanks very much for agreeing to be interviewed. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and about the Landless People's Movement (LPM) and its work?

Lekhetho Mtetwa (LM): I am Lekhetho Mtetwa, secretary of the LPM in Protea South, from Chiawelo, in Soweto.

The LPM was set up in Protea South in 2001, and the person who introduced it was Maureen Mnisi. She became its chairperson for plus-minus 11 years, and was also Gauteng LPM chair.

How did I join? I raised issues in a public meeting, around land, and people said, "You know what, come and join us." And I was given light on how the LPM movement works, by word of mouth. Later I was given the documents of the movement. Eventually I was selected as a secretary, because I was politically strong. Initially I was co-opted onto the committee, later I was elected.

The LPM fights for the rights of the people, for housing, land, and jobs and against evictions. It fights so that the people may be able to support their families.

It doesn't support elections to the state, including to town councils. LPM focuses on the needs of the youth, and the community. We take the demands, and go to the local councillor, and present the demands. If nothing happens then, we take our demands to the top. And if nobody listens, then we march on government offices, and present a memorandum, and we barricade the roads, and stay-away from work.

LVDW: Can you can you tell me more about the current situation of the LPM? How is it doing these days?

LM: We are trying our best to rebuild the movement, and most of the support we have, we are getting from our community – and also from other social movements, which support us.

The LPM was, at one stage, claiming to be a country-wide organisation. Today, though, the main branch is in Protea South, Soweto. One of the issues is that there is not a structure linking different branches, even if they did exist. But as far as I know, the only other existing branch involves comrades in Durban. But there is nothing which I heard from that side for some time, about what they are maybe doing. We have contacts with them, but there is nothing we have planned together.

Understanding the problems, let us remember our branch of the LPM and other branches also, have faced repression. In our case has included arrests and assaults, and also attacks from vigilantes from nearby better-off areas in Soweto.

But there are also internal challenges. Recently there was a change in the leadership of the LPM branch in Protea South: I am the secretary of the new leadership. This change was linked to a fight against people who were using the movement for their own benefit, including trying to push it to join political parties, and provide votes. This is part of a bigger problem of nepotism, favouritism and opportunism that we see in some movements, and that we fight.

The earlier leadership tended to be top-down, not always even elected. We have changed that. What we are doing now is involving each and every person in our community, so that they can be part of us. What I am trying to say is that, as "leadership," we are not saying that, because we are the leaders or office-bearers, we will control and do everything. Instead, before we take things forward, we call a mass meeting wherein the community brings up suggestions and issues. Then we sit down as a committee, look at these matters, and then work out a way ahead. Then after that, we go back to the community: if they agree with everything, then we go further with everything; that is what we do; otherwise we again take the points and again change the plan, and again go back to the community.

Our focus is our branch's work, where we try our best to make the LPM movement go back to what it was before, but better. At this present moment we are trying to rebuild the movement within our community, and from there, we are planning to start other branches in other places.

LVDW: In the past, the LPM used the slogans "No Land! No Vote!" and then "No Land! No House! No Vote!" once it helped form the Poor People's Alliance along with *Abahlali baseM-jondolo* and others in 2008. Do these slogans still get used?

LM: Yes, it doesn't end. It doesn't end as long as we are living under the circumstances under which we are living.

LVDW: And in the long-run what would be your vision of a new, a better South Africa? And what would be required to make this into reality?

LM: For me, I want to see everyone owning land and resources together, in common; everyone having a house, people living equal lifestyles and having useful jobs.

We should introduce the anarchist principles: all movements should come together and fight the system and in that way, build for revolution. We will then be able to defeat the state and the capitalists and thereafter the working class and poor people will be the ones controlling everything – everything which the bosses and politicians are owning and controlling at this present moment.

LVDW: How do you think we can create, solve the job problem in South Africa?

LM: By kicking out the bosses and taking over the factories and workplaces. That is the only way.

LVDW: Thanks very much for your time.

LM: Thanks a lot, com.