

## Shack Fires are No Accident

by Raj Patel and Richard Pithouse

Before the Treatment Action Campaign successfully politicised AIDS it was widely assumed that people killed by the HI virus had died from natural causes. Now, outside of the Presidency, it is widely accepted that people who die from AIDS are most often killed by a profoundly immoral policy rather than a treatable virus.

A similar politicisation needs to be fought for with regard to shack fires. Disastrous fires are regular events in shack settlements. People are regularly killed and badly burnt. They are also subject to the major set backs that follow from a total loss of property, including things like I.D. books and school uniforms that are necessary to access the resources that the state does provide to the poor.

In Durban shack dwellers often do everything that they can to cope with the constant danger of fires. In many settlements there are volunteers who take turns at standing watch for fires. When half of the Lacey Road settlement in Sydenham burnt down last month the shack dwellers' movement, *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, was able to send in teams of relief workers from nearby settlements to clean up and reconstruct the settlement and to use various networks in and outside of the settlements to arrange large donations of food, clothing, blankets and building materials.

*Abahlali baseMjondolo* have also invested a lot of time in looking for safer options for cooking and lighting. Recently, a promoter of a new fuel - ethanol (a sop for SA's sugar cane industry) - came to the Kennedy Road settlement, to advertise a stove that is supposedly cleaner, safer and cheaper than paraffin. The stove is able to use less fuel than a paraffin stove partly because the fuel itself burns hotter. The savings come from less money spent on fuel. But only if you can turn the thing off when it has finished cooking.

"Otherwise, it is more expensive", said Zodwa Nsibande, an Information Technology student in Durban who suffered severe burns from an ethanol stove a few days ago. "I was trying to turn it off, but it didn't work, and the flames shot out, and then it exploded." The flames seared through Zodwa's t-shirt and trousers, leaving her with first and second degree burns.

She was not the only victim. The hot, clear ethanol flames flumed out of the side of the stove, burning Zandile, Zodwa's mother, on her leg as she rested. "It's lucky that the children were playing outside. They'd be burned to ashes otherwise," said Zandile. The Nsibande family's bed was consumed by the flames, as was the front of their shack.

Neighbours quickly brought water to douse the flames in the shack, "though when we tried to put the ethanol out with water, it got much worse", said Zodwa, who eventually extinguished the flames on her body by smothering them with dirt. But the ambulance didn't come. "It's always like this in the Jondolos. If we lived anywhere different, they

would have come," said Zandile. For 90 minutes, Zodwa's burns were left untreated, and by the time transport arrived, arranged in desperation through a middle class friend with a car, Zodwa was in a trance of pain, her wounds a sash of blood and fluid beneath her clothes.

At Addington Hospital, she was given painkillers, bandaged, and discharged at 3am. "How could we pick her up?", asked Zandile. "We don't even have electricity - how can we have transport?" In the end, doctors at Addington, whom Zodwa praised highly, arranged a stretcher for her until the morning as there were no more beds available.

"We need electricity," said Zandile. "And if the government doesn't give it, I'll make a plan." Zandile is right. The only way to stop the fires is for the settlements to be electrified. The eThekweni Municipality's electricity policy states that "In the past (1990s) electrification was rolled out to all and sundry...because of the lack of funding...electrification of the informal settlements has been discontinued." The claimed lack of funding is not some objective reality. It is a political decision. The Municipality has chosen to support the uShaka themepark and the A1 Grand Prix and to offer public subsidies to casinos and hotels. It looks like it may now commit itself to building a new stadium. All of these subsidies for the rich could have been used to ensure that shack dwellers have access to the electricity that will protect them from the constant threat of fire.

Public investment in elite projects is often justified in the name of the international publicity that will come to the city. In fact the city's appalling treatment of shack dwellers has recently got far more international publicity for the city than uShaka or the A1. Many influential publications like the *New York Times* and the *Economist* have recently run prominent stories highly critical of the eThekweni Municipality in this regard

Although the eThekweni municipality has decided not to put electricity into the shacks, the city's richer residents are happy to employ shack dwellers as domestic workers, petrol pump attendants, waiters, security guards and so on. Shack dwellers are not a different species of humanity living in a different world to the middle class. Often they are the people minding the children, folding the laundry and protecting the property of the middle class. If the municipality continues to choose to condemn them to nights of terror they will have to take to the streets do demand electrification or, as shack dwellers do in the most of the world, connect themselves illegally.

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