

# **Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) and Makhanda Citizen's Front: Interview with Ayanda Kota**

Sunday 3 March 2024, by [ETKIND Roger](#), [KOTA Ayanda](#) (Date first published: 23 February 2024).

**We started the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) in 2009. I think what gave rise to it was two things: the failures of the municipality which came out of IDP meetings. And the feeling that the politicians are taking us for a ride and taking us for granted. They are not accountable. They use the IDPs to preach. There's no meaningful engagement other than them talking to us. And managing us. Around the issue of jobs, people were quite frustrated that there was a lot of nepotism.**

## **Objectives**

It was formed to be a local structure to challenge issues of corruption, nepotism and patronage. Jobs for pals. Jobs for comrades. Jobs for relatives. But more so the issues of services. The key issues were housing and corruption.

## **Main achievements**

1. Another was when we took the buckets full of faeces to the City Hall. There is this thing of 'out of sight out of mind'. There was talk about eradication of the bucket system. But it was not eradicated. It was one of the issues raised in IDP meetings. So we took the buckets to City Hall and dumped them there. Immediately, Winnie Mandela, who was in the portfolio of sanitation, visited Grahamstown and indeed they were given money to eradicate the bucket system. We don't have the bucket system in Makhanda anymore. So that was a highlight.
2. Also a highlight was being seen and being an example. It was on television, on Cutting Edge. Then we also saw our comrades in Cape Town, taking it to the airport, taking it to the legislature, something that started in Makhanda. They saw it in Makhanda. It was a highlight because it moved comrades from other areas. It was a highlight because it did not end in Makhanda. We saw it in Cape Town. We saw it in PE. We saw it in other places in the Eastern Cape.
3. And also the highlight was taking Makhanda to court. We were not too sure. But as we continued, we were convinced it was a correct move and correct political decision. And the court took a decision that this municipality must be dissolved. And after that, again, we saw many communities taking their municipalities to court. So it did not end in Makhanda.
4. Another highlight was the formation of the Makhanda citizens front contesting elections and winning five PR seats. And there are quite a number of movements that are saying, how did you do that? But a question is how do you make it a point that we learn from other people's struggles? And to make sure that we don't lose what we have; it doesn't become completely obliterated, that we don't come to other local government elections and you won't have MCF.
5. Also a highlight was our participation around COVID. We became doctors without qualifications. We encouraged people to go and get vaccinated. We were organizing kombis for

elder people. We were visiting homes and making the point that older people get vaccinated. We also had soup kitchens running that were able to deliver to the homes of all the people. The soup kitchens can serve as a recruitment drive as well. It brings people to the organization. They know that organisation does care for us, and is there for us.

## **Key challenges**

Well, it's a question of membership and leadership. Today, you go to AGM, you elect 13 comrades into the committee. After two years, you're left with about five because others are working, or have migrated and left the city because of the conditions. Again, after a year, after two years, when you're going to another AGM, you realize that there are three of you. Others have really lost momentum. They can't attend a meeting and come back home hungry. And so it's quite demoralizing and demotivating. So that has been a huge, huge, huge challenge.

And the shortcoming of the UPM was its failure to take transformative struggles. We had gardens here and there. But if, for example, we had a huge programme on livelihoods, then we were going to be able to provide food to our own members. It changes everything. It means people are able to put food on the table.

And also the issue of politics. Because if you have a very constant political education, some of these issues will count, but at least they won't count a lot. There won't be a weak point in any movement.

## **Challenges and achievements with elected councillors**

I think it's an achievement to have a foot and a voice in the council. And also, the issue of participating and winning this, it's an achievement. Firstly, the big challenge would be, you want to have councillors that are political.

Setting up regular mandating and reporting mechanisms for those councillors can be a difficult thing to do. For example, there will be an attempt to meet for a council agenda, look at it and have a discussion as a collective. So we prepare our councillors when they go to the council meeting so they are quite vocal. Not all of them will attend the session. Party, it's a question of self confidence. It's not that they are sabotaging you.

And then constituency meetings. You say okay, on Mondays, let's have a constituency office day. They should come to the office, give us a report on council and on portfolio committee meetings that they are part of - on finance, on infrastructure, on local economic development, and on corporate services. So, you want to look at all those reports and deal with each report and prepare them and also prepare your organization.

We just had a three-day workshop where we were looking at these issues. And we are going to another workshop where we'll be calling a councillor from Port Elizabeth who was a councillor for United Front to come and share the experiences with our comrades.

And we made a mistake when people started joining Makhanda Citizen's Front (MCF). UPM is a lot of sacrifice. It's sweat and blood. And we were naive about politics in a formal sense. As you know, politics comes with corruption, with patronage, with money. When you say politics, people associate politics with all of that. We were naive to that because we haven't been in that formal political terrain. We have been in the activism space. And all of a sudden the councillors were doing things behind our back. So they were not accountable to MCF and were taking MCF to another direction. So we had to go through the process of recalling them. We expelled them and replaced them. So it's something that we we learned that we must never make that mistake anymore. Your cadre has to be trained politically.

We've got five PR counsellors. And they each contribute R3,000 from their salaries. That enables us to pay allowances for 2 administrators and 5 organisers, as well as an office and internet.

The organisers are here every day from Monday through Friday, from nine until half past four because we prioritize this work. And these are the people who prioritize this work more than the councillors who are really getting paid. At some point we even had to fight - you must come to the office, otherwise, we will not take your money. Don't only come to the office when you want to give us money. It creates a very bad impression. And you must contribute in your communities. The Constitution of MCF does spell out what is expected of them as far as their community is concerned. Some of them say they are paying the R3,000. But we encourage them to have programs in their communities. So tension is there.

They are paying attention on the issues of infrastructure. They had an oversight visit as MCF councillors to some of the projects. They were able to correct the report on performance, but also on finances, so they're learning the ropes.

There are two issues they would brag about. They will brag about what they're doing in their communities. And they'll brag about what MCF and UPM are doing outside the municipality. But they will also brag about raising issues. despite them being defeated. They'll brag about being able to blow the whistle. It was last year, when there was an issue about water that has E coli, we went with them to test water and we found Ecoli. They blew the whistle.

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**P.S.**

Amandla

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