

In 1980 Sonny Oluson sang about South Africa: "Fire in Soweto, burning all the people / Fire in Soweto, the people are dying / Look at all the shooting, the children are crying."

Now, virtually every day throughout the world, the mass media presents images of the flames spreading across a racially divided country.

On TV screens and in newspapers, angry blacks confront heavily armed white policemen and soldiers in the streets of the cities. Tyres, cars and houses are burning. Rubber bullets, live ammunition, sjambokes and batons are used indiscriminately and ruthlessly.

In the weekly news reviews, the damage is assessed. White politicians and apologists talk about current and promised 'reform measures', while progressive black leaders speak of the people's suffering and their determination to be free.

Anyone relying on the commercial media for an understanding of South Africa might only see an intransigent white minority locked in a violent struggle for political and economic power with an increasingly militant black majority.

This understanding would essentially be an accurate one.

But it is not complete. What is left out is the commitment

of the dominant resistance movements inside and outside

the country to working non-racially for a non-racial society and for peace in South Africa.

What is ignored also is the significant number of white

people and organisations who share this commitment.

One ^{such} organisation is the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) whose ^{dramatic} growth in last two years has been an exciting development in the white community.

Formed at the end of 1983 as a broad front of political and

and religious organisations, it has campaigned vigorously for an end to the system of compulsory conscription into the South African Defence Force (SADF). Under this system, every young white man has to serve an effective four years in the army.

Dr Duan Thom, a ^{member of ECC and} conscientious objector who works in a primary health clinic in Crossroads (a squatter settlement of 100 000 people near Cape Town), is an example of the growing number of young men who resist this system.

"In Crossroads", he says, "I have learned first hand of the viciousness of Apartheid and the extreme oppression of blacks. I have witnessed people shot indiscriminately by riot police and the SADF, and their shelters ruthlessly torn down. Can I serve in the SADF which is executing a war declared on the very people I work with and serve? Can I put on the SADF uniform - the

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same uniform that symbolises the oppressors in the townships?"

Juan is only one of many conscripts who, with the support of their families, teachers and ministers, have expressed their opposition to being forced to take up arms against fellow South Africans in defence of apartheid. In January this year 7589 conscripts failed to report for duty, five times the number for the whole of 1984.

Although there would be several reasons for this dramatic increase, it is no coincidence that it follows the most extensive deployment of troops inside the country in its history.

Since October last year the SADF has invaded and occupied over 23 African townships in an attempt to crush black resistance. Troops have fired teargas at funeral mourners,

assaulted township residents and killed several, and have allegedly looted houses and raped women. They have arrested people on pass law and influx control offences and been involved in forced removals. And they have set up bases inside many townships and effectively placed them under military occupation.

"At the moment people are becoming too afraid to move in the streets, especially after dark, because they are terrified of being confronted by a weapon wielding eighteen year old in

Brown" says Stone Sizane, the publicity secretary of the United Democratic Front in the Eastern Cape.

Stone explains: "the SADF and police act jointly to pick up large numbers of young people who are on the streets. If you happen to resist arrest because you are frightened or don't know why you are being arrested, they can shoot at you. Every day

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people are being shot."

"Our people grow angrier when they see how their residential areas, already so delapidated and neglected, is being used as a testing range for the police and army. It is like a battle field in there sometimes. It cannot continue."

The mounting opposition to conscription and the internal use of the army from both conscripts and township residents has been accompanied by growing support for the ECC.

It now has fifty member organisations and six branches around the country. It is supported by all the mainline churches, by political groups from ^{affiliates of the United Democratic Front} ~~UDF affiliates~~ to the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) Youth, by women's and religious groups, by school pupils and university students, and by artists and popular bands. It is gaining support in the Afrikaans community and

It is winning the difficult fight to get coverage in the local press!

This support is due in part to the fact that conscription draws the white community into supporting Apartheid in the most direct possible way - as combatants. It is also due to the emphasis that ECC places on its call for 'a just peace in our land'.

Dr Duan Thom puts it this way: "Many whites are motivated to work ^{for} ~~for~~ peace and a just society rather than simply to work against an evil one. By a 'just peace' we don't ^{only} ~~just~~ mean an absence of war. We mean a South Africa where Apartheid has been abolished and all its people live freely as citizens of a unified country with a democratically elected government."

An inevitable consequence of ECC's growth has been increased State harassment. The Security Police

have raided the houses of many ECC members and confiscated documents. Its publications have been banned for possession or distribution and police spies have attempted to infiltrate it.

Recently, four ECC activists were detained for two weeks under Sec 29 of the Internal Security Act which provides for indefinite detention and denies the detainee access to his/her lawyer, doctor and family.

These direct acts of repression have been accompanied by SADF and government propaganda in the media attempting to criminalise the ECC. It is possible that these smear tactics are intended not simply to undermine support for ECC but to prepare the white community for its banning or for a major trial.

Mike Evans, the Cape Town chair of ECC who was one

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of the detainees, responds: "We are considered dangerous because we represent ¹ dissension from within the ranks, ² and ³ of the white communists because we give the lie to the myth that black and white people cannot work together towards a common future. Yet despite State intimidation, our public support is stronger than ever and our activists are more determined to continue their work."

The flames are indeed spreading across South Africa and the polarisation between blacks and whites is frighteningly great. But the commitment to democracy ^{and peace,} and the principle of non-racialism that guide progressive organisations tell us more about the kind of society we will one day have and about how we will get there.

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