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SUCCESSFUL ANC RALLY HELD DESPITE GOVT. OPPOSITION by Benjamin Pogrand.

Why did Security Branch detectives raid the national conference of the ANC in Jbg on the night of Saturday May 30? This was one of the unexplained riddles of half a week of intense political excitement during which time there were several dramatic moves by the authorities aimed at preventing the ANC from holding its planned open-air mass rally. Although the rally could not be held, a crowded highly successful two-day meeting in the Gandhi Hall provided more than adequate recompense.

The detectives were present in the hall from the start of the conference at 11.15 in the morning. Shorthand writers sat at the back of the hall - on chairs brought specially for the purpose - and apparently recorded every word said from the platform. The two-hour reading from the 11 page report of the ANC's National Anti-Pass Planning Council was carefully noted. So was the text of Chief Albert Lutuli's message to the meeting. And the conference resolutions were duly recorded by the detectives as they were read out.

Yet at 8.15 that night four Security Branch men accompanied by a uniformed sergeant and five constables, all armed with revolvers, mounted the platform and amidst a rising chorus of cries of protest from the crowd requested copies of all the documents used at the conference. The detectives said they had a warrant to search everybody in the hall. The documents they wanted were, however, simply handed to them and they left the platform to take up their stand again at the back.

No attempt was made to search anyone and the entire operation was carried out courteously and politely. In fact, immediately afterwards Mr. Oliver Tambo, ANC deputy president-general who was in the chair, told the meeting: "When Security Branch detectives who have to keep an eye on our activities behave with self-respect, we reciprocate."

Complimenting the audience on being a "disciplined force", Mr. Tambo added: "We handed over the documents because we saw no reason not to do so. We do not have any subversive documents".

Originally, the national conference was planned for the morning and afternoon of May 30, to be followed by an all day mass rally on Freedom Square, Sophiatown on May 31. But the mid-week news of the banning of the president-general, Chief Lutuli, was followed by the order of the Chief Magistrate of Johannesburg - on the evening of May 29 - prohibiting any public meeting on the 31st.

The ANC reacted swiftly and within four hours of the issuing of the order, announced that it would also call a double protest meeting on the afternoon of May 30. Also to be held in Freedom Square, the meeting was to protest against the bannings of the president general and the mass rally.

Again the authorities acted and a further banning notice was issued on the morning of May 30. And as the authorities and congress chased each other by the tails, the Chief himself arrived on the Band - "to sense the feeling of the people and to look around".

At Germiston station on May 29, the Chief was met with honour - by Mr. Tambo, a small group of local ANC members, the station master, high-ranking police officers and at least 20 Security Branch detectives. Silently, Mr. Lutuli walked to his car. Silently the ANC members, the detectives and the police trailed after him. When he drove away, who should be behind but two car loads of detectives and a riot-van?

The performance was repeated next morning on Johannesburg station. The crowd was however, considerably greater: more than 1,500 ANC members of whom about 200 were dressed in "volunteer" Baki uniform with the green gold and black Congress colours, top-rank police officers, a swarm of detectives and uniformed constables - and at least 150 to 200 armed railway policemen out of sight in the station buildings.

Serene and dignified as always, the Chief walked to his car, accepting it all as his natural due. After this, attention switched to Gandhi Hall, tucked away between massive neighbouring mine-houses. Before a crowd of about 900, with nearly 150 white and African policemen stationed outside, Mr. Tambo opened the conference.

Stating that the oppressed people of this country "are annoyed because of the high degree of provocation practised against a people who have repeatedly stated their desire for peace", Mr. Tambo said "We invite the world to look and see what is going on here, and to see that we are doing nothing and are the victims of these mad acts."

To a tremendous burst of applause, Mr. Tambo concluded: "Chief Lutuli had been banned. He is to be gagged and locked up in Groutville for five long dull years. But we don't care what they do to him. We will fetch him and take him from Groutville to Pretoria."

Following the reading of Chief Lutuli's message in which he warned the ANC to "beware of false State propaganda which goes to any length to present apartheid as the common good for everybody", national executive member Mr. Robert Basha said "it is Chief Lutuli's desire that we should carry on this meeting peacefully and that nobody should be provoked by the presence of the police".

It was almost exactly at this stage that a police officer entered the hall and asked Mr. Tambo to disconnect the loudspeaker relaying the ~~xxxxxx~~ meeting to the street outside, as public meetings had been banned. This request was immediately complied with. For the rest of the day, the conference continued its steady course, the only interruption being the document raid in the evening.

The lengthy report of the National Anti-Pass Planning Council, read by Mr. Duma Nokwe, the secretary-general, described the pass-laws as the "backbone" of the Govt's attempts "to muzzle the people politically and ruin them economically". It added: "The whole right of the African to exist has been made dependent upon the pass".

Discussing what could be done, the report stated: "some people think that the only way of fighting the pass laws is by destroying the passes. This in the view of the Planning Council is not the only way of struggling against the pass system nor is it necessarily the most effective way."

"It is not the document itself towards which we must exclusively direct our attention and devise a form of struggle, but the role of the document in the whole structure of our country". Africans should use the power available to them - their economic power. This could be applied through strikes and other industrial action and by withholding African purchasing power from particular institutions.

Recommending that an economic boycott of "products of Nationalist-controlled institutions" be launched on June 26, the report continued: "the economic boycott weapon will not be confined to the Nationalists. It will be used at appropriate times against any institution which infringes upon the rights of the people".

June 26 should also be observed "as a day of self-denial". Africans will be asked not to buy anything during the day, and nobody should go to any places of entertainment, including beerhalls and cinemas. The report also called for mass meetings throughout the country on June 28.

The conference did not however, take any direct decision about the launching of the economic boycott. It agreed instead "to campaign to the limit of our ability against the pass laws and to campaign for the total abolition of passes and for the restoration to all people of their human rights", and to demand of the Government "an immediate end to the system of mass arrests for petty, technical offences against pass, permit and tax regulations". Mass demonstrations on June 26 would take the form of "self-denial" as recommended by the Planning Council report.

Continuing on the Sunday morning, the conference saw an even larger crowd: more than 1,300 packed the Gandhi Hall and overflowed into passages, a neighbouring courtyard and even stood on a nearby roof watching the proceedings through the windows. The Police were again present, about 130 being on duty outside. The Security Branch were also there. There were, however, no interruptions and no incidents.

The day got off to a rousing start when Mr. Resha called for a ban on the buying of potatoes from midnight that day as a protest against the ill-treatment of Africans on farms. The conference also demanded a full investigation into the conditions of farm workers, particularly in the districts of Bethal, Nigel, Heidelberg, Standerton and Trichardt. It called for immediate appointment of an impartial commission, to ~~and~~ include Africans, to investigate the conditions. Later, Mr. Tambo said the ANC would see whether a commission was appointed and whether Africans continue to be sold to farmers. "Depending on the progress made, we shall decide whether to call off the potato ban or not," he said.

Other resolutions passed by the conference included criticism of the Group Areas Act as "a basic violation of human rights" and condemnation of the bannings of Chief Lutuli and of the ANC's planned week-end meetings.

So the meeting came to an end. It was a wildly enthusiastic and spirited gathering throughout. The militancy of delegates was high, but it remains to be seen whether this will be translated into act on. The proof will be seen in the success or otherwise of the potato boycott, the economic boycott and the effectiveness of the June 26 campaign.

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