

October 1957 Ob. J. H. T. H.

LIPASA! AMAPASI! - the most hated of all words. Yet these are not really Sesutu or Khoza words at all; they are but the word "pass" with prefixes and suffixes. For there is no word in African language for the pass; the badge of slavery with all its ugly implications is something imposed, the symbol of cold blooded inhumanity, foreign even to the language.

African women live in the shadow of the pass system; they see the suffering and the hardship which it brings to African men. Every year more than a quarter of a million African men are convicted under the pass laws, more than a quarter of a million African women wait in lonely anxiety for the husband, the father, the son who does not return, who is only found after long weeks of searching at denying police stations. These women know too well the fear of the endorsement of the pass "out of the municipal area", the brutal exile of the unemployed. Now African women themselves must be exposed to these dangers, must add their own fears to the unbearable anxiety about their men. For Verwoerd and the nationalist government has decreed that African women shall carry passes.

What does it mean to a woman to carry a pass? It means that homes will be broken up when women are arrested and sentenced under the pass laws; it means that helpless children will be left uncared for, when the mother may be arrested and thrown into the pick-up van as she goes to buy food for her family but perhaps leaves her pass at home; it means that women and young girls will be exposed to humiliation and degradation at the hands of pass searching policemen, at the hands of "ghost" squads, with indescribable license in the dark night; it means that African women may be hired out for farm convict labour, sold for ninepence a day; it means that the African woman will lose her freedom of movement, her right to sell her labour where she pleases.

It is not the first time in the shameful history of S. Africa that African women have been threatened with passes. In 1913 the municipalities of the Free State tried to issue passes to women - and failed. For the women resisted in Jagersfontein, in Winburg, in Bloemfontein; they refused to buy or to carry their monthly passes, refused to pay fines and flooded the gaols. And the women won their heroic battle, for after five years of failure there was no more talk of issuing passes to women. Nor were there any serious attempts for the next forty

On March 11th two thousand women of all races met in Johannesburg and resolved "We shall go to Strydom. We shall go again together to Pretoria and we shall protest against the passes." Another Pretoria Protest? Another invasion of the sacred Union Buildings? But Strydom had said last year "This sort of thing must be stopped!" Verwoerd was ready and struck the first blow. The women of Winburg were taken unawares, fooled by Verwoerd's men and their lies, bluffed into believing that the reference books were not passes. Newspapers published photographs of beaming African women proudly displaying the pretty little books! But within a week the women realised how they had been tricked. And, just as, forty years ago, the women of Winburg and of the Free State had courageously opposed passes for women, so, in March 1956, hundreds of Winburg women marched silently to the Magistrate's Court, the hated passes in their hands, and there they burnt them on the ground.

Klerksdorp women met the threat of permits under Section 10 with a protest march in April of four hundred women to the Native Commissioner. Blocked by police, the women sat in the road and demanded that the Native Commissioner come to them. He came; and was greeted with a message to Verwoerd, "If you force us to take passes, we shall burn them." May saw demonstrations in Brakpan and Bethlehem. Twelve hundred women of Brakpan chose Monday - because it was washing day! "We are not going to carry passes!" declared four hundred women of Bethlehem.

August 9th was coming nearer; the day when the women of South Africa would go again to the Union Buildings. In June, almost four hundred domestic servants of Johannesburg went together to the Native Commissioner, who only a few days before had had to face a thousand determined women of the Western Areas. Courtesy and patience were wearing a little thin, for Saturday was becoming Women's Day at the offices of Native Commissioners! Orlando and Alexandra Township women had demonstrated, too, and on June 23rd, a year after the Congress of the People, one thousand women of the South Western Areas went to the Native Commissioner to demand that pass laws be abolished. But the women of Pretoria outstripped all other areas with their demonstration of four thousand women, spilling out of the Native Commissioner's office to block Church Street itself.

Now the demonstrations were coming faster and greater - like waves beating upon the shore. "Large numbers of women saying the same thing!" grumbled the Commissioners. Yes, they were saying the same thing, thousands and thousands of women were saying it, and they are still saying it. "Women don't want passes!"

It had become a mighty chorus throughout the land. Five hundred women of Venterspost handed in ten thousand signed protests. "Afrika is my name!" replied the women of Westonaria to questioning policemen. "It never took place!" said the Native Commissioner of Evaton, when two thousand women marched seven miles to his office - but ten thousand protest forms were left there. Ermelo women were arrested for marching in a procession to present their protests. Two thousand women of Port Elizabeth gave up a day's wages to tell the Native Commissioner "We shall not rest until we have won for our children their right to freedom, justice and security." Three hundred women of Kimberley, despite continuous vicious oppression, made their way to protest against passes.

On July 26th, Verwoerd struck again - only two weeks to go before August 9th. He announced in the Government Gazette that "every African woman" in seven areas in the Cape would be required to "appear at the magistrate's office in order that a reference book might be issued to her". There was no longer any pretence of the "identity book". That bluff was over, and Verwoerd openly proclaimed the reference book - that which strikes dread into the heart of every African family. But which were those seven areas? Strange that not one was within a hundred miles of any place where the women had been demonstrating. It was the story of Winburg again. Attack where the women are far from the centres of resistance, fall upon the women of Beaufort West and Dewetsdorp, of Adelaide and Wepener.

The demonstrations rolled on towards August 9th. And on that day, twenty thousand women from all parts of South Africa, of all races, cried "NO" to Strydom in the greatest demonstration of all our history. And Strydom heard. No matter how he buried his head, hid behind his closed doors and windows - he heard. South Africa heard. The world outside South Africa heard.

The cry of the women thundered through the land. The women of Durban, of Queenstown, of Port Elizabeth, of Cape Town, of Cradock, East London, Grahamstown and Paarl took up that cry as they too demonstrated on the Ninth of August. "We shall not rest until pass laws, permits and all laws restricting our freedom have been abolished."

The women of the Free State, of Winburg, Senekal and Bloemfontein, who fought and broke the first imposition of passes on African women, forty years ago; the freedom loving men who burnt their passes and suffered goal and torture for their courage; Johannes Nkosi who gave his life in the pass struggle in 1930; today they

know their struggle and their sacrifice was not in vain, for their daughters are leading the struggle and a mighty resistance has begun, a resistance that must gather force and momentum as the months go by, as men and women go forward together. For the men of the Congress Movement will not, dare not stand aside. In one short year, fifty thousand women have come forward to demonstrate. Let each of those women bring twenty other women into the struggle against passes, and in the end there will be no passes for women - or for men.

Verwoerd rages, proclaims more areas where women must take out passes, but still he shuns the centres of resistance. De Klerck threatens new laws - to prevent protests at the Union Buildings, and South Africa rocks with laughter at his impotent bravado, for if the people can't protest in one way, they will in another! And Strydom is silent. There is no challenging roar from the lion of the North. But the women are not fooled into thinking they have the last word. For they know that not only gaol lies before them in the road to freedom, but the deadly weapon of banishment from their homes. Banishment - an ugly word with an ugly meaning. And unemployment - no permits, no jobs. But "No workers, either" say the women of Port Elizabeth.

No easy task lies before the men and women of South Africa, for the support of all must be sought. Courageous and inspiring demonstrations are only a part of the struggle; the other part is the patient house to house work that leads to the demonstrations; the education of the people, from the reserves to the townships, from the factories to the kitchens, from the farms to the suburbs; the strengthening of the men and women in those very dorps which Verwoerd is now attacking one by one, ordering men and women at the same time and in the same place to take out reference books.

But the year which has just gone by, the women's year, has its roots in the past, in the strength and courage of the people, and this year will itself provide the roots of the future. Can we doubt the future which will spring from such roots as these?

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FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN 1954-1963

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