

With the spotlight of the world focussed on the military conflict in Angola, questions concerning the role of the SADF are numerous, but to a large extent are left sadly unanswered. The End Conscription Campaign (ECC) has tried since its inception in 1983 to show what the role of the SADF is, both within South Africa's borders and in the Southern Hemisphere. We have called for an end to conscription where young conscripts are forced into a defence force where actions and beliefs they often do not share. The bloated defence budget (30% of Govt expenditure) and the brain drain serve only to exacerbate the situation in the country.

The Defence Amendment Act of 1983 which allows only religious pacifists a non-military form of national service is commonly acknowledged as inadequate, leaving many conscripts in a severe moral dilemma. The call by ECC for an alternative non military service to be made available to all conscripts in religious, welfare and community organizations, has received greater impetus due to a number of developments.

- * A call by major churches to have the legislation for alternative service broadened.
- * A recent survey conducted among welfare and non government organizations indicate 49 such organizations willing to employ national servicemen in almost every type of professional and non professional occupations.
- * A recent NDIY conference endorsed a motion of support for alternative service, as has the IFP for a similar motion presented by the Pretoria East branch.

* Recent meetings betw ECC and the SANDF in 1988 where ECC proposals for an alternative national service were discussed, and are currently being considered by the Min of defence.

x As part of ECC's national campaign for alternative service, 4 of ECC members participated in a SA VS (South African Voluntary Services) camp in Alexandria, an impoverished district in Lebowa. The aim of ECC in participating in the camp was to show in some small way not only what non military alternatives exist to conscription, but also the glaring need of areas within SA of human and financial resources.

The conscripted community in South Africa does not see or experience alternatives to compulsory national service in the SANDF. It is also true that one seldom gets the opportunity to participate in community action that is beneficial to the community as a whole.

) However ECC's participation in the SA VS camp in Lebowa demonstrated in some way the enormous potential ^{that} ~~there~~ exists for participating in constructive action. For those of us who joined the project of building schools in the Alexandria district, the experience was meaningful in an emotional and physical sense. In a short period of 10 days, 6 new classrooms were well on their way to being completed. On another level we realized that racial harmony, an experience denied us by Apartheid, was easy to build if one had the opportunity to do so.

On our arrival the community organized a meeting with us to discuss the work which needed to be done. A spokesman - person for our group outlined our role in the building of classrooms while the community organized itself in preparation for the tasks which lay ahead. Experienced builders in the community supervised the various tasks and the bricklaying itself. The various skills involved making bricks, ~~clay~~^{mortar} and bricklaying were passed on to us, as well as the community. Furthermore we all helped in the building of a pit latrine for the school. There was so much to work to be done, 10 days seemed insufficient. We realized that our contribution was a small yet at the same time meaningful one.

The impoverished nature of the community was a glaring factor which spurred us on. The school which consisted of 9 classrooms catering for 850 children. Many classes were held in the open, under trees or some other type of shelter. It was clear that the educational facilities were inadequate, as were those relating to housing and other basic amenities.

During the 10 days spent in Lebowa, we travelled extensively through the area, fetching sand, water and building materials. Our impressions of the area were not of an independent state living in comfort and promoting their own culture or value system, but rather of an impoverished rural slum, where survival is a lifelong task in itself. We felt apart they had a lot to answer for.

It was inevitable that we would come into contact with the SADF, Lebowa is classified as an operational area by the SADF, which was "invited" into the area to maintain law and order. The SADF arrived at the school and detained certain members of the camp who were there at the time for not having a permit to be in the region. We got our first taste then of the real tensions which exist between the community and the SADF. The headmistress of the school apologized to us for the SADF having disturbed our work. Some teachers were worried we would be beaten up or be expelled from Lebowa. As it was, we were later released when a permit was finally organized by the local magistrate. We were left more motivated and convinced that alternatives to conscription into the military were needed urgently.

In the space of 10 days we helped contribute to the upliftment of one community in Lebowa. A meagre contribution that serves as an example of what can be done, an example of what the conscripted section of our society can do. A contribution which Ivan Toms, Dave Bruce and thousands of young white male South Africans who have left the country rather than serve in the SADF could have made to the building of a better society.

Collection Number: AG1977

END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

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