

## COSAWR DRAFT POSITION FOR ECC CONFERENCE

### INTRODUCTION

This paper has been prepared for presentation at the ECC National Conference on 24-27 May 1990. It outlines the history of COSAWR, its current priorities and its position on the issue of war resistance.

### HISTORY

COSAWR was established in late 1978 by the first group of war resisters who gained asylum in the United Kingdom. It grew out of a specific political context where white democrats were analysing their contribution to the liberation struggle in South Africa; at the time when the political scenario was dominated by ideas from the black consciousness movement. In 1980 a further branch of COSAWR was established in the Netherlands.

COSAWR's priorities were then seen as a) assisting asylum seekers with legal and other advice, b) research into the military and the publication of this research through a journal *Resister*, c) participation in the international campaign for the isolation of the South African regime and d) campaigning internationally in support of war resisters and the fledgling war resistance movement in South Africa.

Support for the right of South African conscientious objectors to asylum in the international community was ratified in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 33/165 of December 1978. However asylum for South African war resisters in various countries has not been an easy or conclusive matter. In the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and in the United States this has had to be won and fought for by individuals under the particular immigration rules of the respective countries. We have been instrumental in assisting individuals to successfully claim asylum, yet the changing circumstances in South Africa mean that it will become increasingly difficult to obtain. We would not encourage individuals to take this route in view of the difficulties which one is likely to encounter.

Our research into the SADF and ways of resisting it has continued to be published in *Resister* since 1979. This research had valuable by-products in putting the issue of the military on the agenda of the liberation movement and the various internal sectors of the democratic movement during the 1980's. We have produced some of the more specialised research on issues such as the Psychological wards in the SADF; the military-industrial complex and more recently on soldiers organisations and organs within the armed forces. In addition we have produced articles on the military and related issues for *Sechaba*, *Anti-Apartheid News* and magazines of the broader solidarity movement. Much of our work fed into the book

written by Gavin Cawthra on the Apartheid War Machine called 'Brutal Force' and we have participated in the production of other publications such as 'Fighting for Apartheid: A Job for Life' in association with the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement,

We have supported the ANC's call for a total isolation of the apartheid regime. In various forms we have backed this position since our inception in 1978 and have campaigned internationally; specifically on the arms embargo,

We have campaigned in support of all the conscientious objectors that faced prison sentences for their stands. This included Peter Moll, Richard Steele, Neil Mitchell, Billy Paddock, Pete Hathorn, Paul Dobson, Brett Myrdal (the early resisters) and Ivan Toms, David Bruce, Charles Bester and Saul Batzofin. Our support internationally for the End Conscription Campaign through the difficult years 1984-1989 has generated a relatively high profile for it amongst the international community and amongst solidarity and war resistance organisations,

Much of the international campaigning we have done has been in the context of trips by COSAWR delegates to various countries in Europe (including Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Ireland) the United States and Africa,

These four areas of work as set out above have continued to form the substance of COSAWR's work during the 1980's,

#### CURRENT PRIORITIES

Following a very successful consultative conference on war resistance organised by COSAWR during March this year we have isolated the following short term objectives; a) maintaining a high profile campaign on the need to abolish apartheid conscription and release imprisoned war resisters, b) organising and exploring issues connected to a return by war resisters to South Africa and c) examining issues related to the armed forces in a period of transition and negotiations,

#### SOUTH AFRICAN WAR RESISTANCE

For various reasons the organisations that have come to represent South African war resistance, namely COSAWR, the End Conscription Campaign, the Conscientious Objectors Support Group and various other groupings have yet to formally consolidate and still operate within a relatively narrow support base,

The situation we find ourselves in now presents a serious challenge to us and our support base. A strategy that will keep all the various sectors of the movement together is a priority. Such a strategy should encompass all those individuals who support a new and democratic South Africa free of conscription and militarism. A long term vision uniting

conscientious objectors and democrats within the armed forces would seem to be a necessary next step on the road to a new South Africa.

We have scored an impressive victory in ensuring that resistance to apartheid conscription has been firmly placed on the agenda. Emphasis must now be extended to democratising the armed forces themselves. In anticipation of such a strategy we are at the moment researching issues connected with such a democratisation of the armed forces. This includes for example research on organisations such as the Springbok Legion and the Torch Commando from the 1940's/1950's and more current research on unionisation of the Armed Forces (international examples), and other forms of soldiers organisations.

#### INTERNATIONAL STRUCTURES

COSAWR in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands, along with the Interim Committee on Conscription Issues in the USA presently represent the face of organised South African war resistance internationally. In addition the Huddleston International Register based in London houses the declarations of individuals who refuse to serve in the SADF.

Events in South Africa, including a public return by a group of war resisters before the end of the year will not eliminate the need for these structures in the short term. Asylum for objectors in the international community can and must be available until political objection to conscription is possible in South Africa or conscription is ended. Various other functions also need to be carried out, including obtaining international support for war resistance campaigns in South Africa.

In line with the development of a new strategy we see the need to work more closely together. COSAWR does not intend to establish itself inside the country, but individuals previously involved in COSAWR will participate as individuals within the ECC and other democratic structures.

#### RESEARCH AND MEDIA

The research and publication of information about the military in South Africa by COSAWR's journal *RESISTER* is unparalleled. The importance of such a journal as a forum for the war resistance movement cannot be underemphasised. *Resister* has until now mainly been circulated internationally but we are now vigorously promoting it inside South Africa. Consideration should be given to relocating the journal inside the country.

#### CONCLUSION

The state as we all know will not relinquish conscription easily and we therefore need to continue the pressure on this issue.

In conjunction with the ANC and the wider democratic movement we also need to assist in the restructuring and transformation of state structures, specifically the armed forces. The broader movement is seeking ways of bringing the SADF under democratic control, democratising its structures and establishing democratic organs within it. The ECC's expertise and experience will ensure that it plays a part in this broader process.

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