

This paper is not an attempt to explore the strategic potential for organisation around the issue of alternative service. Rather, it is an attempt to document the degree and breadth of support for a new system of alternative service. It is also by no means fully comprehensive but rather a starting point for debate.

ECC's call

ECC formulated its call round about the time of the Peace Festival in 1985. It was discussing and debating the type of evidence that it would give to the SADF's Geldenhuys Committee that was investigating the system of conscription.

Alternative service, together with the right of conscripts to refuse to serve in the townships and neighboring countries, were adopted by short term or interim demands. At the time there was a debate in ECC about whether a call for alternative service, as well as the other interim demands, was a strategy or a principal of the organisation. Consensus achieved was that the principal of the organisation was the right of the conscript to choose, with an end to conscription being the long term ideal with alternative service and the right of the conscript to refuse to serve in townships and neighbouring countries being short term demands along the road to ending conscription. They were also seen as more 'realistic' demands that were constructive and could be addressed realistically to the state via, at that time, the Geldenhuys Committee.

The demand round alternative service was taken up during the Working for a Just Peace Campaign (WJP) in the first quarter of 1986. The campaign used the notion of national service, questioning whether military service was in fact national service by concretely demonstrating what ECC believed was true national service. These demonstrations took the form of WJP projects which involved building cheches, tricycle tracks and many others with the theme 'construction not conscription'. With conscripts demonstrating practically the sort of non-military national service they would be prepared to do, ECC's demands for a new and realistic system of alternative service were advanced: it should be:

- * available to people who object to service in the SADF for political, moral and ethical reasons, and not just available to those who are universal religious pacifists.
- * the same length as military service, ie 4 years.
- * available in community, religious and welfare organisations and not just in government departments.

The WJP campaign was assessed by ECC to be its most successful campaign it had run up to that time. The message of the campaign was accessible to a broad grouping of

of people, and the form of the campaign, the WJP projects, enabled over 800 members of the public to participate actively in the campaign through their involvement in the projects.

With ECC's re-focus on conscription after the difficult first year of the emergency, it was decided at the February 1988 conference, to embark on a programme of action over a period of at least 1½ years with the aim of bringing about a change in the present system of alternative service being the key element of that programme. While other factors also contributed to the growing strength of ECC up to its banning, alternative service was an issue at that time which resonated with its constituency.

While ECC had been successful in taking up the issue of alternative service, it by no means 'invented' the issue. The issue of alternative service is rooted in the early origins of war resistance, and calls made for a reasonable system of alternative service emanate from a much broader and more varied constituency than that addressed by ECC.

The first objectors and the churches response

Since the early 1970's the mainstream churches have been involved in questioning participation by their members in the SADF and providing support for objectors. The seminal SACC resolution fundamentally challenged the system of conscription with it calling member churches to "... Challenge all their members to consider whether Christ's call to take up the cross and follow Him in identifying with the oppressed does not in our situation, involve becoming conscientious objectors."

The resolution caused a storm at the time and was widely condemned by both mainstream and liberal groupings and organisations. Section 121(c) of the Defence act was introduced shortly after the resolution, and made it an offense to discourage people not to serve in the SADF. Nevertheless, at least 13 people were charged between 1976 and 1983 for refusing to serve and faced sentences of up to two years in prison or DB.

The response of the church to these early objectors was public support, as well as passing a number of resolutions in support of the right of people to object and resolutions calling for a system of alternative service.

With the state facing pressure from the increasing number of objectors, whose stands were highlighted through campaigns conducted by groups such as COSG, they set up the Naudé Commission, with its brief to examine the possibility of introducing alternative service. The churches made representations to the commission calling for a system of alternative service that recognised all objectors. However, the recommendations of the commission resulted in the Defence Act being amended in 1983 with alternative

service being made available to universal religious pacifists and the prison sentence increased to six years for 'political' objectors.

This was unacceptable to the churches who opposed to Board for Religious Objection and launched campaigns demanding that all objectors should be recognised by the Board. Some groups like the SACBC went as far as refusing to let their members serve on the Board until such time as their demands were recognised.

In 1985 most of the churches reiterated their objections about the present system of alternative service and called for a new system of alternative service that recognised all objectors, that community service should be made available as an option to all conscripts, that it be the same length as national service, that alternative service should be offered in recognised church, welfare, research, development or peace corps agencies and that the Board for Religious Objection be broadened. These representations were made in a joint paper supported by the SACC, Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church, Quakers, United Congregational Church and the SACBC.

While much of the Churches support for objectors has been at the level of passing resolutions and supporting individual objectors, there has been initiatives in recent years to concretise the resolutions through practical actions and campaigns. Perhaps the first of these was the ambulance group consisting of Objectors facing jail sentences. Richard Steele and Peter Moll with members from the Baptist Church and Quakers attempted to run an ambulance service on the Namibian border as a practical demonstration of what they regarded as an acceptable alternative to military service. Needless to say, their attempts were frustrated by the military authorities.

Another practical initiative from the churches has been underway since the end of 1986, the Churches Alternative National Service Project (CANSP). This initiative aims to concretise resolutions passed by the mainstream churches in support for alternative service, by the establishment of a two year system of alternative service which is established by the churches within church projects and structures and is offered as an option to all objectors. With the system not being recognised by the state, objectors doing alternative service in the churches project, still face prison sentences. However the churches will support these objectors while they are on trial and in jail. CANSP has been endorsed by and is in the process of being endorsed by the mainstream churches.

While the mainstream English churches have traditionally supported objectors, an exciting new development has been the passing of a resolution by the NGK Western Cape synod in 1987 supporting the right of individuals to object and calling for a system of alternative service that is open to all objectors.

The new wave of objectors

The new wave of objection since 1987 has sharply refocused attention on the issue of alternative service. The new wave started with Philip Wilkinson who publically objected to serving in the SADF, but in the end was convicted of failing to report for a camp. He was the first objector since new legislation was introduced in 1983 that increased the prison sentence from two to six years.

The new wave is characterised by the willingness of individual objectors to go to jail and the mass stands of individuals publically committing themselves to refusing to serve in the SADF.

Ivan Toms was the first to be sent to jail and received what was seen to be the mandatory prison sentence of $1\frac{1}{2}$ times the amount of outstanding service 'owed' to the SADF; in his case 630 days. Ivan had a high public profile before his trial as a result of his work in the Crossroads squatter community and his position as an ECC office bearer. The public outcry about sending someone to jail who was doing good work in a deprived community was ironically encapsulated by the magistrate, who on sentencing, said that Ivan was not a menace but an asset to society.

David Bruce, who unlike Ivan Toms, had not public profile before his stand, received press coverage and elicited a public response that surprised even his closest supporters. The fact that he was the first to receive a six year prison sentence for refusing to serve in the SADF and his thesis that the SADF was upholding a racist system was a challenge to every conscript and prompted many to call for a system of alternative service so that people such as David Bruce should not be forced to spend six years in jail.

The collective stands of objectors has probably had as much impact as the individual objectors. Beginning with 23 objectors in Cape Town in August 1987 and continuing with the stand of the 143 objectors countrywide in August 1988, the collective mass defiance of the 143 was something that could not be ignored by the state as it was a direct challenge to the system of conscription and fueled the growing calls for a reasonable system of alternative service. Their response was to scapegoat ECC and use it as an opportunity to ban the organisation that it had previously labeled as one of the four biggest enemies of South Africa.

The new wave of objectors have been seen by some as the cutting edge of the war resistance movement, as it directly challenges participation in the SADF through a critique of the role of the SADF in South and Southern Africa. It has also had the effect of placing the issue of alternative service firmly in the public eye. Ivan Toms and the 143 objectors directly called for a system of alternative service available

to all objectors. But in a way what has been more powerful has been the corollary of their stand ~~that has been the most powerful~~: introduce alternative service and people such as Ivan Toms and David Bruce will not have to spend lengthy periods in jail when they can be contributing more constructively to South Africa. While the stands of the new wave of objectors has prompted many groupings to condemn jail sentences and call for alternative service, it has perhaps also acted as a catalyst for other groupings to examine the problem of conscription and the lack of alternatives and to make calls for a system of alternative service for a host of other reasons. The following sections document some of the calls that have been made by different groupings in support for a new system of alternative service.

Moral outrage

A wide range of groupings and individuals have been morally outraged that Ivan Toms and David Bruce have been sent to jail and this has resulted in articles, statements and resolutions in support of alternative service.

The mainstream liberal press have perhaps been at the forefront both in terms of writing editorials calling for alternatives, but more importantly providing newspaper space and reporting on the issue. The Natal Witness, Cape Times, Argus, Sunday Tribune, EP Herald and Daily Dispatch has all had editorials calling for alternatives, while the Star's editor Harvey Tyson has publically announced that he is running his own campaign to bring about alternative service by lobbying key people. The general manager of that paper has also called for alternative service while the Star's Starbridge column regularly reports on and promotes the idea of alternative service as an issue which can bridge divisions between the different groups in South Africa.

The PFP, Independent party and the National Democratic Movement, have all passed resolutions at recent party congresses in support of objectors and calling for a revised system of alternative service.

Progressive organisations have supported objectors and ECC in its call for alternative service. This support comes from organisations working in the white areas, but also in the townships where the new wave of objection has had a tremendously powerful impact and has been important in the building of non-racialism. In the past alternative service projects conducted by ECC in the townships and black areas has always had unqualified support from both organisations and people in those areas.

Universities

Universities, together with the churches, has been one of the traditional areas of support for alternative service. On the Nusas-affiliated campuses a committee known

as Milom was formed in 1978 and for the next two years played an important role in raising the issue of war resistance on the campuses. Its task was to investigate the influence of military service on conscripts and to explore alternatives to service in the SADF. Since then, campaigns have been run highlighting the stands of individual objectors on the campuses, but during ECC's existence ECC played the key role of opposing military service and campaigning for alternatives on the campuses. There are indications that other organisations will be refocussing on this issue.

During the recent SRC elections, three candidates at Wits, UCT and Rhodes standing on alternative service tickets received a high proportion of votes. At Rhodes a research group has been set up to conduct research into the feasibility of and need for alternative service. At Wits the Medical faculty has passed a resolution in support of alternative service and a survey is being conducted to gauge the degree of support for alternative service amongst medical students. The medical school initiative is planned to be taken into other faculties at Wits. Similar plans exist at UCT to unite the university community round the issue of alternative service. At Rhodes a survey conducted on a sample of final year students at the end of 1987, indicated that 56% of students were contemplating leaving the country because of the system of conscription. A similar survey has been conducted at Durban and the results should be available by the end of the year. Students involved in the Law Directive at UCT have been looking at proposals whereby legal graduates could do alternative service as public defenders and are involved in a legal aid clinic as a form of alternative service project (?).

H W van der Merwe's Centre for Intergroup Studies at UCT is planning a conference for the middle of next year that aims to bring together a range of groups across the political spectrum to discuss the possibility of a new system of alternative service. There is a possibility that the SADF and government representatives will be involved in this initiative.

Laurie Schlemmer's Centre for Policy Studies at Wits is involved in an ambitious research project investigating the costs of the present system of conscription as well as the need and support for alternative service. This project has great potential particularly in terms of reaching professional and business groupings and the research should produce some powerful results.

Members of the Union of Democratic University Staff Associations (UDUSA) recently held a meeting with the Minister of National Education and asked him to recognise conscription as an issue the effects of education as many male students ^{have} left the country to avoid military service immediately after finishing their university degrees.

Professionals

There has been concern expressed among a range of professional groupings about the large number of professionals who leave the country and thus add to the brain drain and the shortage of skilled manpower. Some of these groups have made representations to the SADF on these matters.

The Cape Law Council, representing attorneys, as well as the possibility of other provincial legal groupings, have made representations to the SADF. The basis of their arguments has been that there is a shortage of public defenders and that legal graduates would be better used by doing their national service as public defenders. Their arguments have been strengthened recently by Judge Didcott's ruling that all accused are entitled to public defenders and the fact that there is a shortage of public defenders. Similar representations have been made to the SADF by the Bar Council which represents advocates. Prof David MacCoid Mason, Dean of the Faculty of Law at Durban, has also come out strongly in support for alternative service on a number of different occasions.

Concern has also been expressed by the medical fraternity about the large numbers of doctors that leave the country. One is the Dean of the Wits medical school and he has blamed conscription and the lack of alternatives available. Another grouping, the Association of Family Practitioners has made representations to the SADF to the effect that family practitioners should not have to do military service but due to the shortage of doctors in rural areas should be able to do their national service at rural clinics.

An interesting resolution was one passed by the Private Schools Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference in 1986. Apart from calling for the right of serving conscripts to refuse to serve in the townships, it also called for alternative service to be available to all objectors. This resolution, passed before the new wave of objectors, is indicative of the organic nature of the issue.

From a slightly different tack, Nicro in Cape Town have been involved in private discussions about the need for alternative service. Their starting point is not an unhappiness with the fact that objectors have to spend six years in jail, but rather that community service is more beneficial than a prison sentence, which is in line with some of the other thought they have regarding prison sentences for 'other offenses'

Business

The degree of support for alternative service as a reaction to the large numbers of

skilled graduates and professionals who leave the country, appears to be considerable. Since 1983 official figures are that 53 000 people have left the country but there are strong indications that this figure is inaccurate and in fact many more have left. It is also estimated that over 75% of professionals leave the country to avoid conscription. It appears that the realisation of this cost to the economy is only just beginning to be realised by the business community.

For example, both the Financial Mail and Finance Week, which can be taken as some measure of current thought within the business community, have both come out in support of a new system of alternative service. In the last few months they have both argued that the present system of conscription is wasteful and causes people to leave the country. They have also reacted favourably to the David Bruce trial.

Another indication would perhaps be the financial support that ECC from time to time received from sectors of the business community as unelicited donations.

Service groupings

For in

During 1986, the Community Servers Group conducted a survey of 100 welfare organisations to see if there was support for their belief that they should be entitled to do alternative service in welfare groupings. 49 out of the 51 questionnaires returned indicated that they would be prepared to have objectors working in their organisations. This included groupings such as the Urban Foundation and Nicro.

Splits within the state around alternative service

While there does seem to be a lot of support for alternative service amongst a broad and diverse groupings, over the past year there are some indications that there has been some thought within the state about revising the present system of alternative service.

The present system is four years old and seems to be under some strain. There seems to be some unhappiness about the use of objectors within government departments and the possible security questions that surround them. Perhaps indicative of this is the comment that PT du Plessis, Min of Manpower, made earlier in 1988 when he said that he had a 'real problem' with the placement of objectors as government departments by and large were not interested in housing them.

There were indications that the SADF was re-examining the present system of alternative service. This became clear during the meeting the ECC held with the SADF with the SADF indicating that they were genuinely examining the system of alternative service. Earlier in 1988, Magnus Malan, in response to a question from Peter Gastrow, had also

said that the system was being re-examined.

However, after the stand of the 143, Magnus Malan responded to ECC's representations around alternative service, saying that conditions had not changed since the ECC made similar representations to the SADF's Geldenhuys Committee and made it clear that he would not receive further representations on this issue, and banned ECC two weeks later.

It seems as if, having considered the issue, that they are not prepared to make concessions around it. But within the Dept. of Manpower for example, there does appear to be some unhappiness about South Africa's manpower problem vis-a-vis conscription. They have cited a figure of R11 m/year that is wasted on tertiary education through people leaving the country. Concern has also been expressed about immigrants who emigrate to escape conscription.

While there has been some thought within the state of this issue and that they appear to have suspended that thought, at least for the time being, elements to the right as well as government supporting editorials have been of interest.

Both Die Beeld and The Citizen commented on David Bruce's sentence feeling that it was correct that he should have been sent to jail as one must support the laws of the land. However they commented that the jail sentence was too long. Similar sentiments were expressed in a CP press statement reacting to David Bruce's trial.

Collection Number: AG1977

END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of a collection held at the Historical Papers Research Archive at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.