

" There shall be Peace and Friendship " - The South African Peace Council in the 1950's

Introduction

The current movement in our country against the apartheid war and for a just peace is not a new phenomenon. In the 1950's there existed a South African Peace Council (SAPC) and regional peace councils that were committed to the struggle for national and international peace.

Through rallies, meetings, publications and petitions the SAPC conducted national campaigns against the development of the atomic bomb, the militarisation of South African society, the wars in Kenya and Korea, and the rearming of Germany after ww2.

The arguments consistently raised by the SAPC in all its activities were that international disputes should be settled by negotiation not war, that there should be universal disarmament, that foreign powers should not impose themselves on third world countries and that national and international issues of peace were interlinked.

These arguments were directed at all sectors of the SA population and were especially well integrated into the campaigns of the Congress Movement. The Congress Movement united the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the Coloured Peoples Congress (CPC) and the white democrats in the Congress of Democrats (COD) in the struggle for a non - racial and democratic South Africa.

The extent of involvement of these organisations in the activities of the South African Peace Movement is an indication of the extent of their commitment to peace in our country.

The international context

The SAPC was formed after the international Peace Movement was initiated by the Poles in 1948 at the World Congress of Intellectuals for Peace and quickly won mass support throughout the world.

Millions of people had been horrified by the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent nuclear arms build up, and were strongly committed to building peace in the aftermath of a devastating world war.

The victory over facism and nazism had stimulated the growth of democratic and socialist parties in Europe and intensified anti-colonial pressure from thirld world countries. In the years after the war, liberation movements had developed in many South-East Asian, African and middle Eastern countries that were soon to win their independence from colonial domination. In this context, and in the context of the "cold war ", the Berlin blockade and the war in Korea, the Peace Movement in SA and internationally began and grew.

The Launch of the SA Peace Movement

The South African Peace Council was launched in 1953 with a Conference in Johannesburg. In attendance were the already established Transvaal and Cape Town Peace Councils and 215 delegates from other organisations, representing over 250,000 people. A national committee was elected and included such people as Rev. Thompson as the chairperson, Ruth First, Hilda Watts, Braam Fischer, Achmed Kathrada and Lilian Ngoyi.

The Conference was addressed by Dan Tloome, Dr. Routh, Dr. Gillman and Nelson Mandela. Delegates were convinced "that mankind can avert thè horrors of war" and stated their opposition to the use of Africa as a warbase. They demanded "bread and social benefits, peace and disarmament rather than war preparations" and urged all South Africans" to ensure that peaceful negotiation triumphs over attempted solutions by force ".

At the close of the Conference the SAPC was formed as "an independent, non-party, non-sectarian body [which aimed] to promote activities for peace by all possible means among all sectors of the people of South Africa ", Membership was open to individuals and organisations and cost a sixpence!

Speaking at the Conference, the secretary of the Transvaal Peace Council, Hilda Watts, outlined the approach that the Peace Movement was to take:

"We must appeal to the housewife in terms of war and prices, homes, living costs; to the scientists in terms of the development of science for the cause of humanity, not for destruction; to artists and writers on how war destroys culture; to churchmen on the moral wrongness of war; and to the African on how the fight for peace assists his struggle ".

Over the next six years the SAPC engaged in a number of exciting campains along these lines.

The National Peace Ballot

The regional Peace Councils' first campaign, before the formation of the SAPC, was the National Peace Ballot in 1951.

The ballot papers asked two questions:

- 1) Do you think the SA government should press for and support negotiations between the Big Powers to settle their disputes peacefully?
- 2) Are you in favour of a Pact of Peace between the Big Powers?

Petitioning took place in factories, door-to-door and at tables in cities. At the same time the Peace Council organised lecturers and professionals to call on the government for a 5-Power Peace Pact and sent its own deputation to the Prime Minister.

There is no record of the number of signatures collected but the campaign organisers claimed some success in involving South Africans in the world peace movement and in linking local and international questions of peace.

Ban the Bomb

In 1953 the World Peace Council called for the banning of nuclear weapons and the peaceful use of atomic energy. The SA Peace Council welcomed this call with enthusiasm and resolved to win active support for it.

Telegrams were sent to various MPs urging them to request "immediate debate on recent dangerous American H-Bomb explosions" and to call on the government "to support calling of immediate meeting of great powers to negotiate outlawing of nuclear weapons".

Scientists, artists, lawyers and other professionals were called on to support the campaign in their different capacities. Symposiums and meetings were held in all centres to discuss the implications of nuclear war. A key issue at these meetings was SA's direct involvement, as a principal supplier of uranium, in the production of the atom bomb.

A tank, covered with the inscriptions " We want Peace," "Ban the A-Bomb" and "We want to live ", was entered in the Pietermaritzburg Azakela Float Competition. The float recieved no publicity and won no prize! A mobile exhibition on the dangers of atomic war was displayed in many parts of the country.

Although the general public did not respond very well to the campaign, it was given full support by the Congress Movement. Signing on behalf of their respective organisations, Oliver Tambo (ANC), Pieter Beyleveld (COD), Dr Moosa (SATIC) and Adam Daniels (CPC), appealed to all Congress members to set aside Sunday October 16 as "Peace Sunday" for the collecting of signatures.

"Money can do lots of things"

The Peace Council linked the issue of the bomb to the problems experienced by ordinary South Africans.

In a pamphlet entitled "Money....can do a lot of things", it was argued that:

"Money buys food and clothing; it builds schools, houses, hospitals, industries; it can be used for research, to conquer disease and mankind's ills; or it can be made into H-bombs that will blow up homes, cities, humanity."

The pamphlet decries the extent of military expenditure internationally and continues:

"In SA the Malan government too is involved in war preparations. The people are being taxed millions to provide more and more military equipment instead of schools, health services and housing. And who are these war preparations directed against? No-one really believes that anyone plans to *invade* SA. It seems *far more* likely that the victims of these weapons of violence will be the people of SA themselves, especially the Africans who are seeking freedom and justice and driven to desparation by repression."

Korea

The SAPC's focus on the war in Korea was a good example of how it understood the cold war ^{and} tried to situate the South African peace movement in an international context.

The SAPC distributed pamphlets on a mass scale against SA's sending airpilots to Korea. It argued that the SA government was preparing for war at home and abroad and "aligning itself with military circles in order to defeat the movements for national liberation and independence."

According to the SAPC's policy document:

"Every blow struck against the present Government and its replacement by a peace-loving government would represent an important victory for the peace forces worldwide. At the same time the struggle for peace weakens the aggressive forces and aids *the movement for liberation*."

The Peace Councils saw America as responsible for the cold war and the arms build up and were extremely critical of its involvement in Korea. When the US aircraft-carrier Midway docked at Cape Town, the local Peace Council organised a demonstration against US war policy. Picketers stood at the *berth* with placards saying "Friendship not Warships", "Atoms for Welfare not Warfare", "Armed might is not Right" and "War makes prices rise". The demonstration was dispersed by the Special Branch.

Germany, Kenya and Suez

Over the next few years the SAPC responded to all the major international crises. It campaigned against the role of the US in rearming Germany, exposing the *naZI war crimes of Dr. Adenauer* and his cabinet and calling for the unification of Germany into a peaceful, democratic state.

The war in Kenya and the proposed sending of South African troops to fight there were strongly opposed at public meetings. Speakers like Walter Sisulu and Ruth First argued that "colonial wars, such as those being fought in Kenya and Vietnam, are running sores in the world today. World pressure must bring such wars to an end and prevent the continued use of arms to maintain the colonial system".

When the Suez crisis occurred in 1956 the Cape Town Peace Council called for a solution that would respect the full independence of Egypt as well as the legitimate interests of the countries using the Suez canal. Two thousand people listened to speakers from the ANC, SACTU, and COD at a mass meeting held on the Grand Parade and pledged their support for "the Egyptians in their struggle against British, French and Israeli aggression." Leon Levy of the Peace Council declared:

"We in SA will not rest while other people are suffering. We must protest against these acts of plunder such as are taking place in Egypt. We hate killing, wounding, seeing people die. We must make it known to the rest of the world that South African people are for peace."

The SAPC and the Freedom Charter

The Peace Council played an extremely important role in the drawing up of the Freedom Charter at the Congress of the People in Kliptown in 1955. The Congress of the People was organised by the Congress Movement which had called on the South African people to state their demands for a future democratic SA.

From all around the country and ^{from} all sectors of society over a million people sent in demands that were incorporated in the Charter. The Charter is regarded to this day as the most democratic document ever to have been written in this country. It reflects the aspirations of the majority of South Africans and lays the basis for a non-racial and democratic society. The Charter opens with the words:

"We the people of South Africa declare for all our country and the world to know that SA belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people."

The demands of the Charter include:

"The people shall govern", "All shall be equal before the law", "The doors of learning and culture shall be opened", "There shall be houses, security and comfort", "The people shall share in the country's wealth", "There shall be work and security" and "All national groups shall have equal rights."

"There shall be peace and friendship"

The SAPC attempted to show the link between the many problems of the people and the struggle for peace, and "to ensure that the demand for peace and friendship between all peoples is written into the Freedom Charter ". The final demand of the Charter, "There be peace and friendship ", was a slogan that had been used across the world in international Peace Council activities and conferences. The sub-clauses of this demand express the demands repeated year after year by the SAPC:

"SA shall be a fully independent state, which respects the rights and sovereignty of all nations;
SA shall strive to maintain world peace and the settlement of all international disputes by negotiation-not war;
Peace and friendship amongst all our people shall be secured by upholding the equal rights, opportunities and status of all;
The right of all the peoples of Africa to independence and self-government shall be recognised and shall be the basis of close co-operation."

A year after the Congress of the People, ^{Key} members of the SAPC were amongst the 156 members of the Congress Movement put on trial in the massive Treason Trial that lasted 5 years.

Although all of the accused were acquitted, many, including Rev. Thompson the chair of the SAPC, were banned. Unlike some of the organisations that comprised the Congress Movement, the SAPC was never banned but fizzled out during the years of the trial.

Assessing the SA Peace Movement

The Peace Movement was never regarded as a vital issue in SA which was relatively isolated from international acts of aggression and war. It never really developed into a mass movement but consisted of a small group of people, embracing a nucleus of intellectuals committed to peace.

The Council was nevertheless able to make a significant contribution to the struggle for a democratic and just SA, particularly within the Congress Movement. It was able through its publications, meetings and petitions to build an understanding of international struggle and solidarity, draw attention to the threat of imperialism to the South African struggle, and make the links between international and local questions of peace.

One activist formerly involved in the Peace Movement commented recently: "I think its a great pity that we've lost this flavour of belonging to the world of people struggling for a better life in all countries. Our horizons have become very limited."

Although many Peace Council members were involved in Congress organisations and the SAPC worked closely with the Congress Movement, it deliberately maintained an independent and "non-sectarian" position. The SAPC believed that what united "pacifists, socialists, democrats and religious groups" was a burning desire for peace. Like today, "the peace movement is the common factor throughout the world between the liberation movements, the trade unions and the individuals who support one system or another".

Conclusions

The Peace Movement of the 1950's stands out as a beacon for individuals and organisations that are involved in the current struggle for the dismantling of apartheid and ^{for} a just peace in our land. It is its legacy that we now carry forward.

The goals and tasks are no less daunting and the obstacles ^{are} as great. But in 1985, the 30th anniversary of the Freedom Charter, the countrywide movement against compulsory conscription, SA's illegal occupation of Namibia and the use of the SADF inside SA, is growing from strength to strength.

In the words of Leon Levy, secretary of the SAPC, when he addressed the Congress of the People in Kliptown:

"Let us go forward to peace. Let us go forward to freedom. There is no freedom without peace and there is no peace without freedom."

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