

THE WOMEN'S FEDERATION

Apart from the campaigns it ran and the way in which it drew women into political organisation, the Women's Fed made a major contribution to the liberation movement by bringing to the fore what we now call women's triple oppression, and to point out that only when all three categories of exploitation and oppression have been removed will true liberation be achieved: colour, class, sex.

A strong factor in establishing the Women's Federation was our sense of internationalism. Women like Ray Simons and myself wanted to link ourselves with world movements for peace and women's rights. At our inaugural conference, there was a speech and resolutions dealing with these questions.

I am not setting out here to give a history of the Fed, which is inevitably associated with its greatest achievement in 1956. What I am trying to emphasise is the vital stream that flows from the beginning until today; hence our need, not always to be looking back, but to know and understand the history of women in organisations.

If you look at the scene at home today as far as women's organisations are concerned, you will realise how much the Federation remains, its ideas shaping the nature of women's politics today.

From the beginning, the Women's Fed clearly indicated its double objective of fighting for freedom and liberation for all through the overthrow of apartheid; and of fighting against women's special disabilities. The 1956 conference adopted a Charter of Aims, the opening words of which declare:

'...our aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women.' Thirty years on, women who were not born when we drafted the Charter are reprinting it, finding its aims of emancipating women from their special disabilities, of removing all social differences that have the effect of keeping women in a position of inferiority and subordination, as apt and relevant today as they were when the Charter was first framed.

The Federation was central to the tremendous mass movement of women against passes; and thrust to the fore of the political scene women of exceptional gifts and strong personalities who not only proved themselves in the women's organisations as able speakers and organisers, but at the same time raised the status of all women in the national liberation movement.

THE YEAR OF THE WOMEN IS BOTH AN OPPORTUNITY AND A CHALLENGE

Today, much more attention is paid to the role of women in the liberation struggle than ever before. We are fortunate that the lead in raising the status of women, the recognition of women's special problems, comes from the top of our organisation.

Comrade Oliver Tambo (speaking at the ANC women's in Luanda) said that

a system based on the exploitation of man by man can in no way avoid the exploitation of women by the male members of society. He also reprimanded the women, who, he said, should "stop behaving as if there was no place for them above the level of certain categories of involvement. They have a duty to liberate us men from antique concepts and attitudes about the place and role of women in society and in the development and direction of our revolutionary struggle. The oppressor has, at best, a lesser duty to liberate the oppressed than the oppressed himself." "We need to recognise," he said in a circular to all sections of the ANC, "that the capacity of the women to contribute fully in the liberation struggle depends, in part, on what we in practice conceived to be their role as women."

And Comrade John Nkademing, speaking on behalf of the NEC, emphasised the necessity to lift the political consciousness of women. "It is the task of the women's section to devote a lot of time to the destruction of the traditional legacy of the oppression of women."

To me, these are feminist ideas; for feminism, in the South African context, is no more than the recognition of women's specific oppression and the need to change that position.

Many of our members, women as well as men, are afraid of the feminism inherent in the idea of a women's section. They have stood in their places for so long that they are afraid to move. They equate our radical ideas with those of different types of feminism, different theories, arising out of Western society. The evidence of the past, the exclusion of women from the ANC until 1943, show how social attitudes are harder to change than political attitudes. We have a positive lead from the top, but it does not always permeate all levels. The implications of this is that one of the main objectives of the Women's Section is to change the status of women within our organisation, which means to change the understanding of our men towards the women, and of our women towards themselves.

We have, of course, rejected a feminism whose only aim is to achieve equal positions with men within existing society. As we have put it, we do not demand the right to be exploited equally with the men. We are not striving to be imprisoned in the very structures that we seek to change.

Our feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or ensure equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination on all levels: sex, race, class; a commitment to changing society.

So we come finally to the question: What is the importance of women in organisations? What is the nature of them to be in the future?

I am speaking here of the work of our Women's Section in the external mission, for this is the question that is of the most immediate concern to us. Here I think there is a need for a shift of emphasis. We have not avoided

The earliest political organisation among African women was the Bantu Women's League, formed in 1913, a year after the founding of the ANC. A remarkable pioneering woman, Charlotte Maxeke, founded the League, which can be regarded as the forerunner of the ANC Women's League, although it would be thirty-five years before the ANCWL came into existence.

Women in the ANC were auxiliary members only, without voting rights, until 1943, when they were admitted as full members. At the same conference, the need for a Women's League was acknowledged, although it was 1948 before it was officially inaugurated.

So the 1943 Conference of the ANC opened the doors of the ANC to women on an equal footing with men. The conference adopted a policy of universal franchise, and changed its constitution to provide for the existence of the Women's League.

At the 1954 ANC conference, the Women's League had for the first time a few hours to meet as a women's section. In 1957, the constitution of the ANC was amended to accommodate the changes that had grown out of the experiences and problems of the preceding years.

The League took some years to build itself into an effective organisation, and in the earlier years work was largely confined to the supportive capacity to men that has always been women's role: catering for conferences, providing accommodation, fund-raising.

There were many difficulties in stepping outside these limits. It was hard enough to organise the men (Smuts had, in 1946, brutally suppressed the first strike on the mines, and trying to organise trade unions among the workers was a hazardous and often dangerous business). Organising women compounded the difficulties because they were economically more vulnerable than the men and less secure; and also by the fact that patriarchal ideology was deeply entrenched in all strata of society; both men and women in Congress were conditioned to accept the limitations of the women's role.

A widening of activities came in the 1950s, reflecting both the increasing activities and importance of the ANC itself; and also, through women's involvement in the struggle against passes.

The organisation that was to play a key role in activating women against the pass laws was the Federation of South African Women, established in 1954. But the Federation did not suddenly arise, as it were, out of nothing. It came into being as a result of a long process of political activity among all sections, and of varied organisations among women.

In pre-war years, and up to 1950, apart from the ANC, women were growing to political maturity within the Communist Party (which was legal until 195) and through the trade unions. The trade unions were to play a great part

in educating women - they still do - and the work of pioneer organisers such as Ray Simons and Bettie du Toit cannot be over-estimated. A whole generation of powerful women leaders grew out of the trade unions, women such as Elizabeth Mafekeng, Frances Baard, Lucy Mvumbelo, and many others. The Communist Party was a strong political training ground for women - the social attitudes of the men were not necessarily any more advanced than in other organisations, but the political theory was advanced, and embraced theories of women's equality; the CP also injected an important strand that still runs through our work - the feeling of internationalism.

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS THAT ACTIVISED WOMEN

Women's political activity seems to fuse the personal with the political. Many of the campaigns that were most important to the women centred around questions of housing, food, education.

The FOOD COMMITTEES that were set up at the end of the war arose out of food shortages, hoarding and unfair distribution. To get basic products that were in short supply, the women had to organise themselves.

The food committees formed in the 40s in Cape Town and Johannesburg attacked profiteering, the black market and hoarding, and established co-operatives in working class areas for the distribution of vegetables and other foods. The organising of food purchases on the wholesale markets, the sorting, transporting, distribution and financing in the co-ops, the direct attacks on food hoarders, the organising of deputations to local authorities and other protests - all these became training grounds for women.

HOUSING was then - as now - a vital issue. When, in the words of one of the squatters, 'the people overflowed', and set up their shanties on the stony Orlando hillsides, it was the women who maintained the camps and kept the protests going. The road runs from Pimville to Crossroads. When I read how the authorities had torn down flimsy coverings in the pouring rain at Nyanga, I recalled how they had done the same all those years ago at Pimville, and how the women gathered together their children, and their soaking blankets, to try and shelter under trees in a driving storm. The tenacity and the endurance of the women, their refusal to submit, has been a potent factor in these campaigns.

There were many others in which women played a critical role: the Alexandra bus strike would never have continued for 12 weeks if the women, many carrying heavy loads of washing or shopping, had not walked those 18 miles a day, 9 miles each way from Alex to town and back. And when the ANC opposed the Bantu Education Act, and called for the setting up of alternative schools, it was the women who ran those schools, using sticks to draw in the sand, because if they put up blackboards they would be arrested for conducting an unauthorised school, while the sums in the sand could be wiped out in a moment.

All these were political campaigns, but meanwhile the women maintained their Manyanos and Stokfels, their religious and community organisations, that were vital in increasing their ability to survive the harsh conditions of apartheid life.

Not only in the towns, but in remote COUNTRY DISTRICTS women were involved in anti-apartheid struggles. Most bitter were around Zeerust in the Western TRansvaal, where the issue of pass books fused with deep opposition to Bantu Authorities and a stooge chief appointed by the regime. When the women burned their passes, their resistance became open confrontation.

These displays of militancy by traditionally subordinate women had a profound effect upon men, both white and black. Hear Dr W.M. Eiselen, at that time Minister of Bantu Administration and Development:

"Recognition of the women's demonstrations on lines that have found favour among the whites, that is, where women already have a status altogether different to that of Bantu women, can at this stage only have a harmful and dangerous effect which can undermine the entire community structure."

And it was in 1959, a year of mass women's actions in Natal, that Zulu women were present at the ANC conference and for the first time they broke an old taboo against Zulu women speaking in public.

While the Zeerust campaign had tragic consequences, when 2,600 women and children fled over the border to what was then Bechuanaland, the whole campaign was part of a struggle that strengthened women's role and organisations at that time and subsequently. The absence of so many men (performing migrant labour) increased the burden of responsibility on the women. The violence of official reaction reflected the extent to which authorities felt threatened by political action on the part of the women, a threat not only to their male authority, but to the male assumptions. In these ways the revolt of the women in the countryside had a significance beyond the immediate issues that ignited them.

Here is Eiselen again: "Officials of the department have been instructed not to have discussions with the masses of women and their so-called leaders, but to make it clear to them that they will always be willing to have discussions with the recognised Bantu authorities, the tribal Chiefs, and responsible male members of this community."

There were many other issues and campaigns that I have not the time to describe: the fight against the beer halls - the women were massed in anger against the authorities, and also pulling their men out of the beerhalls; the Indian Passive Resistance campaign, that brought to the fore Indian women leaders who later participated in the Women's Federation; and the Defiance Campaign, which proved to be an activating issue that brought in many women for the first time - our own Lilian Ngoyi was one who became activated through the Defiance Campaign.

those dangers I mentioned at the beginning , the negative aspects of organising women into their own groups or sections. In addition to some of the negative aspects already mentioned, it has led to confusion and overlapping in our work in, for example, such areas as education and logistics. We don't need a separate committee to deal with the education of our women members - what we need is for the women's section to make proposals to the whole organisation about the training and educating of women. It is true that there are two facets to the question of education: we have to educate our women to take more responsibility and leadership and play a more prominent role in our organisation; but we also need to improve our work by educating our men, for many of them are extremely sexist in their ideas, their attitudes, and show this in the way they talk. We feel strongly that there are areas of work that are regarded as belonging to the women's section, when in fact they should be responsibility of the organisation as a whole. Perhaps it embarrasses the men to discuss collecting napkins for the creche, but they have an equal responsibility with the women for the care of the children in our movement.

I am using these as examples only. Because of these things, the WoOmen's Section has recently made some proposals for changes in the way it should work. These have not yet been fully discussed, and I myself do not necessarily agree with all the proposals, but members must think very carefully about the issues raised.

I want to finish by reading you an extract from a speech made by a black American woman in the 19th century. She was Anna Cooper who before an audience of women in 1892 declared:

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, on the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favouritism, whether of sex, race, country or condition. If one link of the chain is broken, the chain is broken. A nbridge is no stronger than its weakest part, and a cause is no worthier than its weakest element. Least of all can women's cause afford to decry the weak. We want, then, as toilers for the universal triumph of justice and human rights, to go to our homes from this Congress demanding an entrance not through a gateway for ourselves, our race, our sex, our sect, but a grand highway for humanity. The coloured woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal. . . and not till race, colour, sex and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all, not till then is the woman's cause won - not the white woman's, nor the black woman's, nor the red woman's, but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. Woman's wrongs are thus indissolubly linked with all; undefended woe, and the aquirement of her "rights" will mean the final triumph of all right over might, the supremacy of the moral forces of reason, and justice, and love in

the government of the nations of the earth."

These are the words of a woman born into slavery, whose compassion and concern extended to all oppressed, and whose understanding took her beyond the narrow limits of her own immediate demands.

I feel very strongly today that a single cord binds our women in South Africa, the women at Crossroads and Nyanga and all the other squatters' camps, to the women at Greenham Common, to the women of El Salvador, Chile - to all those struggling against old bonds and new chains for a world of justice, of freedom, of peace. For like them, our understanding embraces the need for change, the struggle for change, and the need for the struggle within the struggle - to free ourselves as women while we are struggling, because women's full participation in the struggle for peace and freedom is the essential condition of our success.

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Collection Number: A3299

Collection Name: Hilda and Rusty BERNSTEIN Papers, 1931-2006

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: **Historical Papers Research Archive**

Collection Funder: **Bernstein family**

Location: **Johannesburg**

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