

COSAWR CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE

The aim of the conference was to look at the issue of the future of war resistance in exile as well as the return of exiles and the future of COSAWR. It was attended by 100 people, mostly from London, but some from the continent. Many had not been involved in the war resistance movement. The conference was addressed by ANC, ECC and COSAWR speakers and followed by small group discussion.

A) Inputs

ANC (Prograssin Naiker): The ANC's priorities are to set up branches within the country with democratic structures and accountable leadership. They will be embarking on membership campaigns. At this stage it is premature to for democratic orgs to merge with the ANC but members of those orgs will be encouraged to join the ANC. Another priority is that of building unity.

With regard to the army, a priority is the democratisation of structures. Conscription does not have a place in the present situation and the ANC's policy is that there is no basis for forced conscription in the future. Ending conscription is also part of the struggle of democratisation and a priority.

War resisters should not return as individual but rather together in a large group and need to make a statement on their return. At the ANC meeting with de Klerk the position of exiles will be discussed. Planning for return should take place after this meeting. After their return, war resisters need to join orgs and they can give an important role contribution with their exile and international experiences.

They are encouraged to join the ANC on their return but it would be logistically difficult for people to join just before their return.

Gavin Cawthra of Coswar outlined the history of the organisation and raised a number of possible options facing COSAWR in the current period (See separate paper). Jacqui Boule spoke about the current priorities and strategies of the internal war resistance movement.

Small groups

Return of exiles: There was a number of different positions that came up. The dominant position was an agreement of the political value of a return of a group of exiles. While they would still face conscription, it would force de Klerk's hand. Return needs to be done in consultation with ANC. The return has to be done in cooperation with ECC who would have to provide support and campaign around the return. COSAWR needs to do international lobbying and campaign to ensure a successful and safe return of exiles. It would also need to facilitate the return. While most seemed to be in agreement with this position, many had constraints that would prevent them returning at the earliest possible opportunity, e.g.: families, wives, careers and even mortgages! It seems as if the initial group will be small. The of objectors returning individually was also raised, although

this will be a less desirable option.

A minority position, but with significant support, was anxiety about a return with conscription still remaining. This was particularly the case for those who have refugee status and would have to surrender their status upon leaving the UK. There was also a perception that it was safer for ANC people to return with returning war resisters facing prosecution if they failed to report for their call-up.

The future of War Resistance in exile

COSAWR should not change structurally and its priority should be the facilitation of the return of exiles. It needs to continue in the short term, but its role will become redundant. However some felt that there would still be a role for COSAWR in the future as not all exiles would be returning and that there would be an ongoing role to do research into the military.

Future issues

Participants welcomed the ANC position on conscription. Some felt that there should still be a non-military form of national service.

Women's group report

The women participants decide to meet separately. They were critical of COSAWR's neglect of women as a group who were effected by conscript and as a constituency within the exile community. The return of exiles is an opportunity for COSAWR to mobilise and organise war resisters. COSAWR needs to organise more social events. War resisters' partners/lovers/paramours/wives /dependents/children all need to be part of the process of preparation for the return.

The participants decided to set up a group for those people who were thinking of returning. The group would look at the issues around the return, consult with the ANC, look at running a campaign in support of the returning exiles. A support group was also set up for those people who are not war resisters but are involved with war resisters.

PREAMBLE: Conscription of white men into the South African Defence Force continues. The period of service is one year and ten months. The penalty for refusing to serve is three years in jail. There are currently two war resisters in jail; Charles Bester and David Bruce. Trials of seven war resisters who have also declared their refusal to serve in the apartheid army are currently taking place in South Africa. It is unclear whether the speculated amnesty for political prisoners in South Africa will mean the release of these imprisoned war resisters and subsequently the ending of conscription itself. An option taken by many war resisters who refuse to serve is to go into exile. The Committee on South African War Resistance (est 1979) remains their organised voice.

PRESS STATEMENT

In the light of recent developments in South Africa around one hundred exiled South African war resisters now living in the United Kingdom and Western Europe gathered in London to consider the return of exiled war resisters to South Africa and to consider the future of war resistance in exile and in South Africa itself.

We welcome the ANC's recent statement that there will be no conscription in a future democratic South Africa.

We agreed that the immediate objectives of the war resistance movement should be:

- * the release of imprisoned war resisters
- * a moratorium on objector trials
- * the safe return of exiled war resisters to South Africa. COSAWR is launching an international campaign in support of these objectives.

We further agreed:

- * that our long term objective is the abolition of apartheid conscription and the establishment of a democratic and peaceful South Africa;

- * that the right of South African war resisters to political asylum or refugee status should be maintained as long as apartheid conscription exists.

War resisters who intend returning to South Africa declare that we do so with the intention of contributing to the broad struggle to end apartheid and that under no circumstances will we again allow ourselves to be conscripted by the apartheid regime.

We send our greetings and solidarity to the broad anti-military forces in South Africa and especially to the End Conscription Campaign and commit ourselves to working together in ending apartheid conscription and militarism.

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Collection Number: AG1977

END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

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