

DISCUSSION PAPER ON ECC'S NEW FOCUS ON THE CONSCRIPT

- Cape Town Conscripts Group, Oct 1987

1) INTRODUCTION:

In the course of recent intensive discussion about its effectiveness under the State of Emergency, Cape Town ECC felt that its future lay in a new focus on the conscript. This will have major implications for the organisations activities and public image. The Conscripts Group has prepared this paper for ECC to begin working through the implications.

The paper covers: the thinking behind the new focus; camper's perceptions of ECC and the SADF; short and medium term tasks to put the focus into practise; and some larger unsolved issues.

The paper will be distributed to all regions as the basis for discussion on the conscript at National Conference.

2) THE THINKING BEHIND THE NEW FOCUS:

The new focus on conscripts emerged out of a Commission of Enquiry and weekend workshop to assess the reasons for ECC's limited effectiveness under the Emergency, and to make suggestions for its future direction.

For the purposes of this paper, the following points emerged:

- a) The Emergency restriction on "undermining or discrediting" military service has caused ECC to move away from its predominantly single issue focus on conscription to a broader focus on militarisation and "just peace".
- b) The focus on militarisation and "just peace", however, was relatively vague and woolly; it lacked clear demands.
- c) ECC also gave up the initiative by running defensive campaigns asserting its right to speak, the public's right to know, etc.
- d) Although the white community seems to be becoming more supportive of "national security" options, conscription remains a major issue of concern. For many young people it is the issue.
- e) The above all point to ECC returning to conscription as its main thrust. In terms of ECC's established objectives, conscripts are obviously the most important constituency.

What is new about this position? The Troops Out campaign, the Working for a Just Peace campaign and ECC's interim demands focussed on the conscripts dilemma and attempted to project his concerns and demands. In an on-going way ECC reaches conscripts through its work with pupils, students, youth culture, the church etc.

What is new about the current initiative is that ECC is now saying: "let us talk directly to conscripts, soldiers and campers as constituencies in their own right", "let us for the first time try to understand where they are at", "let us discover how different types of conscripts see things, and how best to reach them", "and let us reorientate our entire organisation to address conscripts and speak for them".

A Conscripts Group was set up to further ECC's work in this direction. The group, which meets weekly as an ECC sub-committee, consists of four campers and three "long standing" ECC members.

Before proceeding, there is the question of definitions. ECC needs a common vocabulary to describe different categories of conscripts:

- * "conscripts" describes white men who face "national service" or camp call-ups into the SADF
- * "soldiers" describes conscripts currently in the army
- * "campers" describes conscripts who face camp call-ups. Note though that "campers" will not use this word to describe themselves unless they are actually on a camp. Some might refer to themselves as "ou manne"
- * "veterans" describes men who served in the United States Army.

3) CAMPER'S PERCEPTIONS OF ECC AND THE ARMY:

The Conscripts Group has organised two house meetings with conscripts who have done their military service. Our approach at the meetings was to get them to talk about their perceptions of ECC and the army. Much of what we heard seems obvious now but came as a real surprise at the time. We realised that we know very little about conscripts, and especially soldiers. We were naive to think we could easily and quickly begin talking to them.

What follows are some of the thoughts expressed at the housemeetings. They are not by any means definitive. They represent the views of only a small and particular grouping of campers. The campers were generally liberal and sympathetic to ECC's views, but not necessarily supportive of ECC as an organisation.

a) Soldiers perceptions of ECC:

ECC has a very negative image amongst soldiers, partly as a result of intensive army propaganda that portrays it as part of the "total onslaught". In addition, even amongst the small number of soldiers who share ECC's views, there are several negative perceptions of the organisation:

- * It has a very radical image and is seen as part of the "UDF/ANC/SACP alliance". The distance that ECC attempts to keep between itself and UDF is not noticed.
 - * ECC is seen as studenty, cliquish and elitist, "a bunch of politicians out of touch with ordinary people".
 - * A most serious factor undermining ECC is its "arrogance" in commenting on the army when so many of its publically identified members have not done military service. This applies as much to men who haven't served as it does to women and older folk who don't face call-ups. Those with most credibility in ECC are the campers and the objectors who have been to jail.
- ECC needs to be represented publically by a greater number of campers to avoid the perception amongst soldiers that "it doesn't know what the fuck it's talking about".
- Women and older folk who speak on ECC's behalf should talk about how they are effected by militarisation and conscription.
- * Many soldiers believe that ECC sees them as "the enemy". ECC's efforts to counter this perception are not really noticed.
 - * Some soldiers have the attitude that "ECC has done/can do nothing for me" and "hasn't really achieved anything".

b) ECC's ability to recruit members:

Campers sympathetic to ECC are reluctant to become members unless they have decided not to do further camps. Otherwise they fear

being victimised and ostracised on their camps. They also expect ECC to be critical of them.

c) Whether ECC should use political or material arguments:

ECC should not abandon political arguments against conscription in favour of material arguments (eg. physical and psychological harrassment, career jeopardy, waste of time, etc.). There is a high level of material dissatisfaction with army life amongst most soldiers but this is not easily converted into political opposition. Sometimes the dissatisfaction in fact leads to greater aggression and conservatism, where the soldier sees township residents as responsible for his being in the army and having a hard time.

As much as soldiers resent the physical and psychological pressure, they take pride in "making it" through the army, and especially through basic training. ECC would be seen as "a bunch of moffies" if it focussed on these issues. Soldiers will also think "ECC can't actually change these conditions, so why try?"

ECC should stick to political issues. The presence of troops in the townships is the most important issue, and "troops out" the most appealing of ECC's demands. ECC's interim demands about alternative service will also have some support amongst soldiers who are politically receptive.

ECC should publicize soldiers rights, especially amongst conscripts about to go into the army. Soldiers believe they don't have any rights. If they know their rights, some would take a further stand against abuses. The army is likely to back away from soldiers who assert their rights.

d) ECC's ability to address serving soldiers:

ECC has either no chance or a very small chance of reaching most soldiers. Army life is geared to isolating them from civil society and conditioning them not to think. ECC is likely to get through only to those who already have political doubts.

ECC should not talk about addressing "the soldier". It needs to identify which soldiers to address. Amongst soldiers there is the widest variety of values, predominantly conservative, depending on age, family, school, etc. Attitudes to ECC and the SADF are also radically effected by the soldiers type and place of military service. For example, a soldiers experience in Namibia, Angola or a township may significantly effect him psychologically and influence his political outlook, positively or negatively. There is also an important difference in serving in a town unit (like Wits Command or the Castle) and an infantry unit (like Upington or Grootfontein). Soldiers in town units are likely to be most receptive to ECC.

e) Problems experienced in the army:

Most soldiers' experience in the army includes many negative aspects: an acute sense of isolation and loneliness; emotional and psychological battering and numbing; physical brutality and resentment at being bullied by "intellectually inferior officers"; difficulty in adjusting to civilian life and relating to friends

when on leave; frustration at job opportunities and careers being jeopardised; moral/political tension; waste of time; boredom.

Army life is contradictory, however. Even soldiers who hate it have positive experiences and feelings. These include: pride in being a soldier, wearing a uniform and carrying a gun; being regarded by white society as a hero; learning skills; developing strong bonds of comradeship with other soldiers; pride in making it through the army; not having any responsibilities; becoming more mature between leaving school and starting a career; "excitement of combat".

4) TASKS:

The Conscripts Group has identified the following tasks to put the new focus on the conscript into practice:

- a) The most important task is to continue gathering information about conscripts and how best to approach them. This will be done mainly through house meetings that involve different types of conscripts talking freely about ECC and the army. We still need to work out creative ways of following up the house meetings.
- b) More campers need to be recruited into the Conscripts Group and other sub-committees.
- c) The Conscripts Group must share its understanding of conscripts with ECC as a whole. ECC must work out the implications of the new focus on conscripts for its political positions and its image as an organisation.
- d) ECC must continuously and energetically integrate the new focus into all its activities. This will mean addressing conscripts, speaking on their behalf or involving campers in every activity—house meetings, public meetings, press statements, actions, publications, etc.
- e) A medium term task is to inform conscripts of their rights as soldiers before they go into the army. This can be done through "know your rights" public meetings, house meetings with campers and school pupils, pamphlets aimed at matric pupils, newspaper adverts, etc.
- f) Another medium term task is to set up "rap groups" in which campers can talk amongst themselves about their experiences in the army.

5) THE UNRESOLVED ISSUES:

The new focus on conscripts and the house meetings with campers have thrown up some big and difficult questions for ECC. Although the process of resolving them will take many months, ECC needs to start working out some tentative answers to the following:

- a) Bearing in mind all of ECC's objectives, what are the implications of the new focus for:
 - i) ECC's political stance and links to UDF;
 - ii) the composition of ECC's executive, public spokespeople and national employees;
 - iii) ECC's overall image as an organisation;
 - iv) the work of each ECC sub-committee?
- b) How do we make it easier for campers to join and participate in ECC? What should ECC's position on its members doing camps be?
- c) Around what issues and in what forms can ECC address conscripts who have not served, soldiers and campers?
- d) Should ECC be working in the long run towards helping to set up an independent conscripts organisation?

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