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THE END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN IN 1988

15 March 1988

The End Conscription Campaign is denounced by its detractors as a communist-inspired Soviet front organisation, and is accused of undermining the SADF. Its members believe that they are working towards true National Service, in a country free from apartheid. One thing is certain: since 17 anti-apartheid organisations were effectively banned on 24 February, the ECC is one of a handful of organisations still able to oppose government policies actively.

Formed in October 1983, following a call by the Black Sash for an end to compulsory military service, the ECC is now in its fifth year. Despite intensive harassment from the state and right-wing elements, and despite clauses in the State of Emergency regulations intended to cripple its activities, the ECC has grown year by year, and now has 14 branches country-wide, with more than a thousand activist members and many thousands of supporters.

In an era notable for the apathy of white South Africans in the face of civil conflict on an unprecedented scale and the continual erosion of human rights, the growth of the End Conscription Campaign appears to be an anomaly. Why should members of a community that has turned its face away from forced removals, squalid "homelands", crushing police brutality, and all the other indignities heaped on black people in the name of apartheid, suddenly stand up to be counted as members of the ECC? There are several reasons, but none more compelling than this: compulsory military service in the SADF is the one major sacrifice that whites must

make in order to maintain their privileged way of life. Conscription affects whites directly.

Even supporters of the government experience compulsory military service as an imposition. To those who believe, as the ECC does, that the SADF is simply a tool used (and abused) by the government to implement and enforce apartheid policies, conscription is intolerable. The ECC believes that it is the moral right of every South African to refuse to perform military service on bona-fide grounds of conscience, whether they be religious, ethical or political. In a situation bordering on civil war, we believe that it is all the more unacceptable that young men be conscripted to occupy black townships, to collect rent at gunpoint, and possibly to kill fellow South Africans. We also believe that it is unacceptable to conscript young men to continue the illegal occupation of Namibia, and to wage wars of destabilisation against neighbouring countries, as is presently happening in Angola.

As an interim measure, since it is unlikely that the government will abandon conscription in the short term, we call for alternative, non-military service to be made available to all bona-fide conscientious objectors for a period equal to the length of military service. At present, only a narrowly defined group of "universal religious pacifists" qualify for a punitive 6 year period of service in government departments or other official bodies.

Not such radical stuff, you may be thinking. Why then has the ECC been the target of such concerted repression? Since the declaration of the State of Emergency on 12 June 1986, nearly 90 ECC members have been detained without trial by the security police,

for periods of up to 11 1/2 months. None of these detainees were ever prosecuted. Our members have been beaten up, have received death threats and abusive telephone calls, and have had their cars vandalised. At least two members' homes have been petrol bombed, and an explosive device was hurled through the window of a Durban member. At the same time, a flood of anti-ECC propaganda has been poured out, ranging from anonymous graffiti and smear posters to glossy, expensive newsletters.

Take, for example, the "Aida Parker Newsletter", which was found by the Media Council to have published a number of untrue allegations about the ECC. The issue concerned was printed in three times the usual number, and distributed widely.

Recently, a senior SADF officer admitted that the SADF was conducting a secret smear campaign to discredit and undermine the ECC. At the military trial of three National Servicemen in Capetown earlier this year, on charges of conspiring to pass confidential information to unauthorised persons, Colonel Claassen of Western Province Command conceded that the SADF had conducted a campaign to discredit the ECC, in order to undermine its ability to attract members and funds. The three soldiers, who were sentenced to 18 months in detention barracks, discovered the plot and had, it was found, decided to inform the ECC. The SADF smear campaign included the production, at the taxpayer's expense, of anti-ECC pamphlets, T-shirts and posters, and even the clandestine hiring of a helicopter to drop defamatory pamphlets issued under a false name.

The so-called "Veterans for Victory" have issued virulent pamphlets calling ECC members "weak kneed, pimply faced youths with bad breath" and "unwashed

rejects." In one pamphlet, they included a "poem" about the Samora Machel plane crash: "Machel, you're dead and rotting in hell! It's the best place for you. God planned it so well." Recently they issued an expensive, glossy 32 page propaganda booklet, alleging that the ECC is linked to the ANC and has a subversive hidden agenda.

Thus, we believe that in recent months the State has changed its approach from outright repression and harassment to a more insidious propaganda campaign. Clearly, the state is determined to break the ECC, if at all possible, using all the "dirty tricks" at its disposal. But it does not want to be seen to be directly behind the attack on the ECC. Why not?

The answer can be found in a senior SADF officer's identification of the ECC as "potentially the most dangerous new organisation to emerge in recent years." We are dangerous to the government because they have no answer to our arguments. Therefore, they do not wish to engage us directly in debate. We are dangerous because we represent a current of thought that runs deep beneath the surface of the apparently calm monolith of white opinion, threatening to crack the facade of general white acquiescence in the policies of apartheid. Ironically, we are dangerous for the very reason that we are not radicals or extremists. Our members are students, workers, teachers, professionals - people whose bona-fides defy the ugliest smears. We represent normal, decent, concerned South Africans.

This is also one of the main reasons for ECC's survival, despite the attacks it has faced. Because we have always operated legally, even when the government has moved the goalposts, our members know that they cannot validly be prosecuted for their ECC

activities. Another strength of the ECC is the fact that our issue exists independently of us. Dissatisfaction with conscription existed before the ECC came into being, and will not vanish if we were to be banned or restricted. Rather than having created an issue, we have articulated existing dissent, and defined the issue more clearly.

What of the future? Despite the Emergency Regulations which make it "subversive" to "discredit or undermine the system of compulsory military service"; despite smears and repression, the ECC is confident that it will continue to grow in 1988. In February, we held our first national conference in two years (the previous conference was banned, together with the 1986 Capetown Culture Festival). Delegates from all 14 branches drew up a program for 1988, centring around a campaign entitled "Action for Alternative National Service." This campaign will focus on the need for constructive, non-punitive alternatives to military service. ECC branches country-wide will undertake community service projects to illustrate possible alternatives. The campaign will also focus on the plight of unrecognised conscientious objectors, typified by "Crossroads Doctor" Ivan Toms, who was recently sentenced to almost 2 years in prison for refusing to do a military camp. In addition, as a service to conscripts, the ECC will be running a "Know Your Rights" focus, informing the average conscript of his rights and obligation in a comprehensive factual way. This is in line with the growing maturity of the ECC, and the realization that it is not individual soldiers who are the problem, but the system of conscription itself.

In the face of all the anti-ECC propaganda churned out by both official and unofficial sources, it is

easy to forget that the ECC is a legal organisation, with every right to state its case. As long as conscripted soldiers are used to carry out policies which are against the interests of the majority of the country's population, there will continue to be popular resistance to conscription. Instead of detaining, smearing and harassing us, the government should face up to the validity and bona-fides of our campaign, and address constructively the root causes of conflict in our country.

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