

NOTES ON THE ORIGINS & HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN'S DAY, AUGUST 9th.

*not intended to be used in this form for articles, but*

These notes ~~are intended~~ to be used as information for speeches and articles, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ - background material that can be incorporated or used as needed.

1. While apartheid affects the lives of all black South Africans with relentless brutality, it is harshest in its effects upon the women.  
African women suffer a triple oppression: as blacks in a racially differentiated society; as workers in a system structured on cheap labour; and as women in a society controlled and dominated by men.

For South African women unemployment, insecurity, a split family, hard labour, are the elements which comprise their daily existence. While the women's struggle is not divided ~~in~~ from nor in any way counter to that of the total black population, at the same time women ~~is~~ need to achieve the abolition of all sexual inequalities ~~as~~ part of this wider struggle, and gives particular emphasis to the issues that women have spear-headed, and to the forms of organisation taken.

2. The struggle against the pass laws has always been basic to women's efforts in South Africa. This is because passes are the means of enforcing the migratory labour system and all the inhuman divisions and separation of families that stem from the overall apartheid policies.

While SA women's organisations have participated in many varied campaigns, at the core is always the struggle against pass laws that render the possibility of a home and family life unattainable for the majority of women.

3. THE FREE STATE STRUGGLE, 1913.

Mass action against pass laws began in 1913 in the Orange Free State, which at that time was the only Province in South Africa where women had to carry passes as well as men.

Women found themselves degraded and impoverished by the passes (which had to be purchased every month), and when petitions and deputations proved ineffectual, they 'threw off their shawls and took the law into their own hands' (Sol Plaatje). They decided on the first campaign of passive resistance against pass laws. In Bloemfontein in July 1913, 600 women marched to the Municipal offices demanding to see the Mayor. When the Deputy-Mayor consented to see them, they deposited at his feet a big bag of passes and said they would not buy any more.

The protest spread to small towns and dorps all over the OFS. Women were packed into jails in inhuman conditions, but they resolutely refused to pay fines, and gradually the local authorities ceased imposing the passes on women. In 1923, when the Natives Urban Areas Act was passed by ~~parliament~~ the white parliament, women were excluded from the compulsion of pass-bearing that applied to all black men.

Although the women's resistance clearly had a long history of growth and development around issues which affected the entire black community, ultimately it was an action that was uniquely their own. It was they who faced the hardships of the goals, separation from their families and loss of jobs. Because women everywhere find it unthinkable to cease feeding their

and caring for their families, they are often less able than men to take actions that inevitably have repercussions on those so dependent on them.

#### 4. INTRODUCTION OF PASS LAWS, 1950's

The Government announced in the early 1950's that from 1956, all women would have to carry passes. Immediately the women started organising against this.

In August 1955, women gathered at a conference organised by the Federation of South Africa Women said: 'The Government ignores our pleas, our meetings, our resolutions. Let us go to Pretoria ourselves and protest to the Government against laws that oppress us.'

While women in the Transvaal began campaigning for their first protest to Pretoria, a thousand women in Durban went to the Native Administration Department crying: 'We will never carry passes under any conditions!'

Then in October 1955, the women of the Transvaal went to Pretoria - 2,000 women of all races, but mainly black, to the very heart of the white government at Union Buildings. To get there, they had met with every possible obstacle, including the refusal, with police interference and intimidation, to permit road transport (which meant the last-minute necessity to raise large sums of money to pay for train fares. An example of this was the town of Brakpan, where women had to raise £200 in a day - somehow they did it.)

The dignity & quiet determination of the women impressed even those who did not understand the true purpose of their demonstration.

(Note re above: When the Brakpan women returned and got out of the train, the men were waiting to greet them with a band playing a welcome.)

Protests grew month by month. Cape Town women marched through the streets of their city displaying their protests against passes; the militant women of Durban were again pounding on the door of the Native Administration Offices; East London women took up the cry. "Oh, what a law! We are refusing totally!" they declared in a memorandum presented to the local Commissioner. In March, 1956, the women of Germiston, undeterred by extraordinary police threats of mass arrests, shooting of leaders, and most severe forms of intimidation, marched to their local offices declaring: "Even if the passes are printed in real gold we do not want them."

In March, too, 2,000 women attended a conference organised by the Federation and resolved to go to Pretoria again.

In the following months, April, May, June, in small towns and large urban centres in all four provinces women were marching and demonstrating in groups of hundreds up to 4,000 at a time. All over the country the cry was to resist the carrying of passes at all costs.

## 5. AUGUST 9th, 1956. THE PRETORIA DEMONSTRATION

The night before the demonstration women began assembling in Pretoria. Homes in the local location (black township) threw open their doors to thousands. In the local hall, ~~xxx~~ women, often with their youngest children, lay down on the floor, while others held all-night 'wakes'. Women gathered at eve-of-protest meetings all over the Reef. Contingents arrived from distant places. Many could not purchase the rail tickets they had saved for - railway officials refused to sell them tickets. Road ~~blocks~~ blocks set up by the police prevented many cars and coaches from reaching Pretoria. But still they came, and finally on August 9th, 1956, while Premier Strijdom remained out of sight, 20,000 women overflowed the amphitheatre of Union Buildings, singing a new freedom song: Strijdom uthitta abafazim uthinti imbokotho - Strijdom, when you strike the women you have struck a rock.

In brilliant sunlight, many wearing national dress, the women took two and a half hours to file through the gardens and into the amphitheatre. Nine women, representing women of all races, carried huge piles of thousands upon thousands of protest forms with women's signatures, and left the forms at Strijdom's office. They then stood in complete silence for thirty minutes before bursting into song.

Even the conservative white press commented on the dignity & discipline of the women.

## 6. THE STRUGGLE WITHOUT END

It is now 25 years since that massive demonstration. Despite all the efforts and protests and country-wide resistance, gradually and bit by bit, the women were literally forced into accepting the hated passes. Old age pensioners were refused their small pensions unless they produced their pass; nurses ~~xxx~~ and teachers were ~~told they would be~~ sacked unless they registered for the pass; officials everywhere refused to accept rents, to issue marriage certificates, to accept hospital patients, and so on, unless the women had their pass numbers. In the country, women who worked on white farms were taken in truckloads to the pass offices by their employers and forced to accept passes.

In addition, the women's leaders were banned or imprisoned, and the four years after the demonstration saw the prolonged treason trial that played a major role in diminishing public activity.

Eventually passes for women have been imposed. But it is an unending struggle that cannot ever cease. The significance for us this year, in 1981, the 25th anniversary of South Africa Women's Day, is to understand what apartheid means, not just for South Africans, but as a racist doctrine that has a malign influence throughout the world. And to join, particularly as women, with those women in South Africa who continue, under conditions of great danger and terror, to fight apartheid.

One of those women is Annie Silanga, a Cape Town woman leader of the 1950's, who today, old and constantly ill, is confined to a wheel chair. She is without either an old age or a disability pension because to this very day she has refused to accept a pass.

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