

OS.13

QUESTIONS AND POSSIBLE ANSWERS ABOUT ECC.

NOTE: this is not a policy document

WHAT IS ECC?

It's a campaign against conscription. When it became clear what role the SADF was playing, and especially after troops first moved into the townships in 1984, a lot of conscripts and their families started worrying about conscription into the SADF. ECC originates in the belief that the conflict in our country is a civil conflict; that the SADF is firmly placed on one side in this conflict, mainly the side that is fighting to defend white privilege and that people should be given the right to decide not to fight in this army. At the very least the role of the SADF is a contraversial one. At present young men are forced to participate in the SADF under threat of a 6 year prison sentence. We feel this is an untenable situation, and that even if we are not able to end conscription we can push for viable forms of non-military alternative service. (At present there is provision for universal religious pacifists to do alternative service. This is a very small group of people, and they have to do six years in a government department.) So ECC is basically a movement that has developed out of the growing number of people who are unhappy with conscription into the SADF.

What we are trying to do is persuade as many people as possible that the situation should be changed and thus bring as much pressure to bear on the government as possible and hopefully in this way force them to change the law. We do this in different ways - by lobbying decision makers (politicians, church leaders, civil rights activists and people from the business sector.) We also run public campaigns in the schools, trying to get pupils and teachers to get involved in the campaign and support the issues. We do the same in the churches. Every now and again we run big public campaigns - like the Troops out of the Townships and the Working for a Just Peace campaigns. At these times we have big and small public meetings, big pamphlet distribution drives and various creative actions and publicity stunts to try to raise the awareness of the public.

SO YOU ARE TRYING TO GET AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE NOT TO GO INTO THE ARMY?

No, under no circumstances! Not only is it an offence under Section 121 C of the Defence Act to in any way encourage someone not to render military service (it carries a sentence of 5 years in prison and/or a R5000 fine), we also believe it is morally problematic to prescribe to someone in this way. The choices for most people are quite limited. They could do their military service and suffer the incredibly severe moral consequences of this action, they could spend a life in exile or they could go to prison for 6 year. (This is if they aren't universal religious pacifists). For these reasons, ECC does not encourage people not to serve. We rather try and ensure that people who have to make these decisions have as much information at their disposal as possible.

HOW DID THIS ACTUALLY START?

There were 3 separate roots of ECC.

Firstly, the churches led the way in opposing conscription. In 1974 the SACC passed a strongly worded statement against conscription and participation

This was eventually followed by statements condemning conscription from the Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists.

The second root was amongst the conscientious objectors themselves. From early on the Jehovah's Witness had objected to service in the SADF and had faced harsh and long periods in detention barracks as a result. In the late 70's there were objectors from groups other than the 'Peace Churches'. In 1979 Peter Moll objected on non-pacifist religious grounds arguing that he could not participate in an unjust war. In 1980, Richard Steele included the role of the SADF in his arguments for objecting. The Conscientious Objectors Support Groups were set up around their imprisonment.

The third root of ECC was amongst the student left. In the late 70's Nusas ran a project called Mil. Com., which had very similar aims to ECC. The commission was closed down in about 1979 and it wasn't until about 1982 that the issue was raised again in Nusas ranks. In that year a focus week was held on the UCT campus which united the three strands of opposition to militarisation and conscription.

In that year and the next, two objectors, Pete Hathorn and Billy Paddock formed the focus for the early movement, working together for the first time.

In 1983 the Defence Amendment Act was passed. This act gave Universal Religious Pacifists the right to do 6 years alternative service in a government department instead of the total of 4 years military service. Other objectors would spend 6 years in prison. The law was clearly trying to split religious and secular objectors. The movement was faced with an impasse. It was no longer realistic to centre opposition to militarisation around objectors, the costs were very high. The solution came in the form of a resolution at the Blacke Sash conference in 1983. The call was for the government to abolish conscription. The call was taken up later on in the year at the COSG National Conference where a number of organisations were represented. This conference decided to launch the End Conscription Campaign which was to be an alliance of various organisations (Black Sash, Nusas, COSG's, Church groups and later the PFP Youth) working together on this single issue.

WHAT IS THE POSITION NOW?

We have 9 regional structures in JHB, Dbn, CT, Stellenbosch, PE, Gtown, East London, PMB and Pretoria and an additional 5 campus branches at UCT, Wits, Rhodes, Dbn and PMB. We grew extremely rapidly after the troops began the occupation of townships with Sebokeng in late 1984. They went on to occupy townships throughout the country. In 1984 over 35 000 troops were deployed in 96 townships. This really intensified opposition to conscription because the role of the army became so clear.

HOW DO THE STRUCTURES WORK - DECISION MAKING, ETC.

There is a lot of variation from region to region. Each region is broken down into sub committees, things like media, culture, contact and there is usually an executive (or a similar structure) with a Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer etc. Decision making takes place in the General Body on which the member organisations are usually represented. As I have mentioned, organisations, like the Black Sash, Nusas, church groups and later the PFP Youth actually launched and ran the campaign. But quite soon ECC started taking on its own dynamic and building up its own membership. We have the situation today where member organisations and ECC subcommittees have equal say in the

in the directing of the campaign.

We also have two national structures; the National Conference and the National Committee. The National Conference is our national decision making forum. About 20 people from each region meet together to talk about and decide upon the direction and policy of ECC. Unfortunately this forum has been able to meet, because of the repressive environment. National Committee consists of 1 rep from each region and 1 rep from each campus branch and is really a co-ordinating group. We try and reach decision both locally and nationally on the basis of consensus. It sometimes takes a little longer, but when decisions are made in this way they are easier to impliment, because there is general agreement about them.

BUT ISN'T ECC BANNED?

No! We certainly are restricted by the emergency regulations, but we are not banned by them. The regulations say you are not allowed to make a subversive statement, and one of the definitions of subversive statement is: "any statement...which undermines or discredits the system of compulsory military service.

We have taken senior legal opinion in several parts of the country, and they agree that we are still able to: 'criticise' conscription (as long as we avoid undermining and discrediting it), oppose the system of cadets in schools, oppose the growing role and presence of the military in civil and political life, argue that the government's chosen path of war is no solution to our country's problems, call for alternative service to be made available to all people who in good conscience cannot participate in the SADF, call for the troops to be given the right to choose whether they fight in the townships and in Namibia or not, etc.

Our strategy is to push the regulations as far as possible. No-one knows exactly what they mean and it may be that we will have to go to court to get clarification.

DON'T YOU THINK BLACKS WOULD JUST KILL EACH OTHER IF THE TROOPS WERE REMOVED FROM THE TOWNSHIPS?

The 'Security Forces' and the government work on the "10% theory". They say that only 10% of the people in the townships are 'agitators',

'rabblerousers', influenced by or under the control of 'foriegn communists' etc. The state argues that the rest of the people (90%) value the presence of troops in the townships because it allows them to go about their lives without intimidation etc. (For an immediate answer there is an assertion on the back of the campus publication that surveys have shown that 93% of township residents want troops out - check this out)

The states argument rests on a fundemental falicy: that opposition in the townships is isolated, inspired from without etc. Towship pupils don't need agitators to tell them they are recieving a gutter education, homeless people don't need to be informed they have no house. You don't get 70 000 people to the funeral of those killed in the Langa shootings if the dead were part of the mythical hated and feared 10%. The fact is that the so-called unrest in the townships is nothing more than an expression of resistance to Apartheid by the overwhelming majority of the people. The troops are not there to keep the peace, they are there to control or crush opposition to apartheid and the continued rule of the Nationalist Party government.

You could see this quite plainly in the role of the army and police in the now infamous events in Crossroads, Cape Town during mid 1986. There was overwhelming evidence to suggest that the army and the police actually instigated and promoted violence by supporting the 'Witdoek' vigilantes, burning shacks etc. A conscript who was part of an SADF unit in Crossroads at the time told us: "we were given instructions to shoot if we saw someone assaulting or killing someone else. They said if it was a comrade we should shoot them dead at once. If it was a witdoek we had to wait 5 seconds - people run as soon as you point a rifle at them, so this instruction really meant we had to kill only comrades."

The fact of the matter is, that the townships were essentially peaceful before the troops moved in in late 1984. There was a massive increase in the death rate (particularly of so called 'black on black violence) after they arrived.

WHY DO YOU CONDEMN SADF VIOLENCE AND NOT SAY ANYTHING ABOUT THE VIOLENCE OF THE ANC?

That's a bit like criticising the Save The Whales movement for not taking up the cause of dolphins in captivity.

Many different organisations belong to the ECC. Each of these organisations have their own policies on a host of matters. Individuals who are part of ECC may be pacifists, liberals, leftists, people who political beliefs are based on their faith etc. These groups come together and unite around one thing: opposition to conscription into the SADF. This is an exclusive mandate. As soon as we stray away from the narrow set of issues relating to conscription into the SADF (militarisation, troops in the township, the role of the SADF) we find ourselves in areas where we wouldn't necessarily agree with each other - we would find we wouldn't be able to maintain the basis for unity in ECC. So we don't have policy on Soviet troops in Afganistan, American aid to the Contras or even on participation in the tricameral parliament. Our mandate is around the SADF because we are conscripted into the SADF - we are forced to participate in this violence and hence we confine ourselves to this area.

I DON'T THINK YOU ARE BEING REALISTIC. THE CITIZENS OF MOST COUNTRIES ARE REQUIRED TO RENDER SERVICE EITHER IN A DEFENCE CAPACITY OR IN THE FORM OF SOME NON-MILITARY OBLIGATION. THIS GOVERNMENT ISN'T GOING TO, AND SHOULDN'T END CONSCRIPTION!

Well, as you point out yourself, most countries give some kind of option between military and non-military service - but anyway.

In any normal democratic country the citizens elect a government that then acts in the general 'national interest'. Defence of the nation is an obvious area of organisation for the government. All citizens are required to give up X number of years to 'serve the nation' i.e. render national service. The problem in South Africa is that only a small minority elects the government that rules over a much bigger 'nation'. So the government arms the nation by calling up those liable for 'service'. But the 'national interest' in this case is in fact the interest of the minority that elected the government. This is laid bare, when we see that the army is being used to control and crush opposition from the disenfranchised majority! - whose 'national interest' is that? It is undeniable that conscripts should be given the right to choose not to fight in the SADF.

But your question included the point of whether we were being realistic. Maybe you are right. Maybe the Nationalist Party government is set on the course of war with the disenfranchised majority. Maybe that means they will never compromise on the question of conscription in the interests of building up as strong a military as possible.

path without a struggle.

SO YOU DON'T REALLY BELIEVE YOU CAN FORCE THE GOVERNMENT TO END CONSCRIPTION?

Given the monumental growth we have experienced up until now and given a climate of freedom of speech and association, we believe we could force the government to end conscription. If the government's programme of intimidation, smearing, repression etc. is successful, then we may not achieve our long term objective of ending conscription into the SADF. However, we do have 'interim demands', ie things we are trying to achieve along the way to our long term objective. These demands are aimed at making the conscripts lot easier - of easing the dilemma. The first call is for the right of all people, who in good conscience cannot serve in the SADF, to do an alternative 'National Service' in non-military capacity. At present this right is granted to universal religious pacifists, but they have to do a punitive six years in the restrictive environment of a government department. We want this right extended, and we want people to be able to do this service in (in addition to the areas already used) recognised church and welfare institutions. Also it shouldn't be a punishment. It should be recognised as National Service, and should thus be the same length of time as 'normal' military service, i.e. a total of 4 years. We also feel troops should be given the right to choose whether they will serve in the Townships or in Namibia.

BUT SURELY YOU CAN'T OBJECT TO OUR TROOPS BEING SENT TO FIGHT TERRORISTS ON THE BORDER IN SOUTH WEST!??

When South Africa sends its troops to occupy Namibia, we are told they are being sent to "the border", as if to suggest that they are defending our country against foreign aggression.

Namibia is a country whose rights independence is recognised by every country in the world. South Africa claims the right to occupation on the basis of a mandate of trusteeship from the League of Nations after World War 1. In 1966 the United Nations, legal successor to the League of Nations terminated SA's mandate and ordered its withdrawal from the territory. In 1971 the World Court of Justice declared South Africa's occupation of Namibia illegal. Yet 16 years later the SADF maintains a presence of 90 000 troops in that country.

It is estimated that between 1966 and 1984 over 10 000 Namibians died in the war (this is nearly 1% of the entire population). Almost 10% of the population are in exile and well-documented allegations

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END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

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