

PC 1612/2/11/44

CIVIL



RIGHTS



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News Letter

Vol. XXVII No. 10
Issued 29/12/80

"A Magic Moment"?

Our annual general meeting was much enjoyed by those present, though we could have wished for a better attendance. We are still going into the question of publishing Dr Hermann Giliomee's stimulating address in pamphlet form. Meanwhile, three extracts from it have been published in the Cape Times (Dec. 6, 9, 11), giving it a much wider circulation than we ourselves can do. Our sincere thanks go to Dr Giliomee for his thought-provoking talk.

What about it, Dr Koornhof? (Cape Times, 18/12/80)

We pay wholehearted tribute to the Athlone Advice Office, whose annual report has just been published. It states, inter alia, that attendance figures at the Advice Office jumped by more than 1000 over the previous year's total - 4662 interviews conducted in 240 working days (in spite of a significant drop in attendance during the bus boycott).

The report mentions factors that made 1980 a "turbulent year" for blacks, including

- * The school boycott, resulting in the closure of all high and higher primary schools in black townships;
- * The bus boycott, begun on June 2;
- * The unsuccessful strike of black meat workers, aimed at obtaining recognition of their trade union rights;
- * The deliberate exclusion of the Western Cape from the post-Riekert moratorium for registration of illegal workers;
- * Continuing Crossroads registration difficulties.

Says the Report:

"The problems, among others (italics ours) of influx control, residential rights, unemployment, contract labour, wage disputes, housing and pension difficulties - all of which are intensified in the Western Cape by the coloured labour preference area policy - are what bring streams of people to the Athlone Advice Office."

Get the Report and read it: obtainable from the Institute of Race Relations or the Black Sash, both at 5 Long Street, Mowbray 7700.

Bursaries for needy pupils (Cape Times, 6/12/80)

Once again we would remind our readers of the work of the African Scholars' Fund. Earlier this month, nearly 400 boys and girls had already applied to the Fund for help. Bursaries are awarded strictly according to need and merit, and regular contact is kept with the scholars. As the Secretary of the Fund says, "We cannot survive in the modern world if four-fifths of our population lack the opportunity to exercise their talents to the full."

Contributions may be sent to Box 294, Rondebosch 7700.

C O P E (Cape Times, 11/12/80)

We await with interest further developments regarding the new political movement COPE (Congress of the People) foreshadowed in a recent news item. This appears to be planned as a "watch-dog" organisation to cover such areas as labour relations, housing, transport and politics, sitting in on parliamentary sessions and making suggestions - or, if necessary, protests - well before "the bills become law".

Considering the speed with which legislation is pushed through Parliament nowadays, they will have to be very much "on the ball".

One laudable feature is reported to be a "strong move" to let (!) women take their rightful place in public life, "rather than inviting them into the hall for the closing session after they had spent their time making sandwiches and tea".

Hear, hear! Would it be tactless to inquire whether any women were "included" in the preliminary discussions?

Telling workers their rights (Cape Times, 13/12/80)

The National Committee for Manpower 2000 has published more than 90 000 pamphlets (in Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho) informing workers of their rights, including those of belonging to an employees' organisation, and of collective bargaining. Titles of the latest eight pamphlets are:

- * The right to work
- * The right to fair remuneration and conditions of service
- * The right of access to training and retraining
- * The right to organise and to belong to an employees' organisation
- * The right to negotiate and bargain collectively
- * The right to the protection of safety and health
- * The right to security in terms of the Unemployment Act and the Workmen's Compensation Act

* The right to job security and the protection against unfair labour practices.

All these are admirable and we commend the Committee's initiative in publishing them. But will they solve the problems listed in the report of the Athlone Advice Office?

Language progress (Sunday Times, 23/11/80)

The "Sunday Times" reports that a black language has been made compulsory for all white primary school children in the Transvaal and Orange Free State. This is soon to be compulsory also in Transvaal high schools, and is already optional in Free State secondary schools.

In the primary schools of Natal and the Cape a black language is offered but is not compulsory.

One of the problems is said to be finding teachers competent to teach these languages. The answer to this lies, of course, largely in training colleges and university faculties of Education. The Durban Teachers' Training College is now teaching Zulu. But ideally the language should be taught by teachers who speak it as their home language. We await further developments with interest.

Two churches saved (Argus, 12/12/80; Cape Times, 13/12/80)

We welcome wholeheartedly the decision of the Technikon's Council to preserve two churches in District Six by incorporating them in the new Technikon campus complex, and wait with interest to see what this will mean in practice. At one of the churches, people moved elsewhere under the Group Areas Act still attend services, although at the other only a handful remain. Like Councillor Tom Walters, we hope the day will come "when all people will have completely free access to them" and be able to live in District Six again.

"Operation Hunger" (Cape Times, 9/12/80)

We commend to our readers the work of the Operation Hunger campaign of the Institute of Race Relations.

The facts discovered by this campaign are horrifying. For instance:

About 643 families in resettlement villages in the Grobblersdal area were found to be virtually destitute, with no breadwinners, no water and no land on which to grow crops.

Field workers are trying to get pensions restored to many who have lost them in transit, and water storage has been planned.

Any who can help are asked to contact Ina Perlman at Johan-

nesburg 724-4441 or the offices of the South African Institute of Race Relations (Box 97, Johannesburg).

Press freedom and the truth (Cape Times, 6/12/80).

We quote with respect from the evidence of Mr Joel Mervis, former editor of the "Sunday Times", to the Steyn Commission of inquiry into the mass media.

"The crucial distinction between democratic and totalitarian societies", said Mr Mervis, "is that in democratic societies, it is accepted that there is more than one interpretation of what constitutes the national interest. It cannot become the prerogative of any single group to declare that there is only one truth and to compel adherence to it." Views of what was in the national interest could differ greatly, he said, and it would be a serious problem to find an objective arbitrator to define the concept. It was the duty of journalists, said Mr Mervis, to seek out and report the truth, and not to report only what the government wanted readers to know.

Mr Mervis described the Steyn Commission as a "watershed" in the affairs of the South African press.

"I say that", he said, "because I believe I am giving evidence at a time when the government is launching a total onslaught on the freedom of the press, and I shall endeavour to show that the government must necessarily regard this commission as part of its total onslaught."

From reports of evidence presented by State officials, said Mr Mervis, it was clear that many of them did not understand the functions of the press, its rôle and status in a democracy.

We hope that the report of this Commission will be such as to dissuade the Government from any further limitations it may be seeking to impose on the press. But the reported banning (see Cape Times, 30/12/80) of two prominent black journalists (Mr Zwelakhe Sisulu and Mr Marimuthu Subramoney) for three years and their placing under partial house arrest in terms of the Internal Security Act can hardly encourage optimism. Nor does the closure of four black Argus company newspapers on the ground that, due to the recent strikes, they did not appear for a month. As the Cape Times says, "the ultimate victim is the public, served by the press ... The cause of free expression, already battered by an all-devouring 'total strategy', takes another knock..."

The situation calls for greater alertness from us all, and deeper concern for civil rights in the coming year.