

The Black Sash's position on civil disobedience

As government decrees under the State of Emergency grew increasingly authoritarian during the past year, the debate on civil disobedience re-emerged strongly within the Black Sash. It is useful to remind ourselves of the Black Sash's position on civil disobedience.

For our purposes, civil disobedience is defined as the considered and deliberate defiance of any unjust law as a strategy of non-violent resistance.

In terms of its constitution, the Black Sash is bound to non-violent methods of opposition. But it is not bound to lawful action. The Black Sash's position on this issue was set out in a national conference resolution a decade ago. That resolution committed the organisation to support wholeheartedly any member, who, in conscience, had made a decision to disobey, or to obey the law.

This resolution reflects the Black Sash's belief that it cannot bind its members to enter into civil disobedience, because this must be a personal, individual action. It also reflects an understanding that there are many good, sound reasons why individuals may be unable to take the risk of breaking the law at a particular time. We respect that, and on no account do we criticise members for their decision.

But the resolution also assures our members that if they, individually or as a group, decide on a principled course of action that involves breaking the law, they will have the organisation's unquestioning support.

There have been several instances of this in the past. We remember Barbara Waite, who went to prison because she refused to make a statement about a visit to Winnie Mandela; Marian Crawford, who went to prison rather than get rid of a domestic worker who could not be registered; Beva Runciman and Cornelia Bullen-Smith, who chained themselves to the railings around parliament to protest the death in detention of Johannes Spogter; groups of Black Sash members who undertook illegal protest action outside the Moroka police station and the Witwatersrand Command; and all those who have participated in various illegal gatherings and marches. We remember them, and we salute them. □

*Right:
Cornelia
Bullen-Smith and
Beva Runciman
after their
protest and,
below, chained
to the railings
surrounding
parliament.*

