

Health issues in the inner city

Actstop is an organisation campaigning for thousands of "illegals" battling for low-cost accommodation in Johannesburg. The biggest challenge at present is to improve the quality of life in city centres and other areas. To this end Actstop has helped tenants form flat committees which discuss the various problems faced by black tenants living in the city centre. Health has become a major concern as more and more people move into the cities with their children.

Actstop has set up a working committee with organisations like the South African Health Workers Congress (SAHWCO) and the National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA). The aim of the committee is to investigate the quality of life and the physical condition of buildings in and around Johannesburg.

Tenants have become increasingly aware that if they do not do something about the dilapidated and rundown buildings that they live in, the landlords certainly won't.

"It is up to us to fight for the right to a just and equitable society and to fight for the right to bring our children up in a healthy environment," said one of the tenants on the committee.

Evictions and poor maintenance are health hazards

Actstop has had some dealings with the Johannesburg City Health Department where complaints about conditions of buildings are usually reported. The health department can only act against flat owners if they violate any municipal by-laws. They do, however, have the power to declare a building a slum and have it shut down and the people moved out. This only serves to exacerbate the housing shortage.

Dr Nicky Padayachee of the Johannesburg City Health Department says that in all his ten years of office, he has no knowledge of any building in Johannesburg being declared a slum. "We would much rather impress on the owner to fix up the premises and to do so in such a way as to allow the people to remain in the building".

More conservative residents of Johannesburg claim the influx of black people into the city centre increases infectious diseases. However, the increasing number of black people making their home in Johannesburg has not caused any notable increase in infectious diseases, and this is backed up the city's Health Department.

Dr Padyachee says, however, that there is every likelihood that there has been a notable increase in social diseases such as alcohol abuse, wife battering, child abuse and sexually transmitted disease. This is not just a feature of the influx of black people into the city centre but rather a symptom of inner cities world-wide and also of massive unemployment.

In the interests of public health, flat owners should be required to provide for the maintenance of buildings and facilities. Poor maintenance of buildings has caused many problems. At Export House in Bree Street, a seven year old boy climbed into the lift shaft and was crushed to death.

In Milton Court, Pritchard Street, at least 60 tenants share one bathroom and toilet. In the winter months braziers are used in the more dilapidated buildings for heat, which increases the possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Often tenants are without flushing toilets for weeks on end and have to resort to the age old bucket system. Actstop believes it is nothing short of a miracle that there actually has been no serious outbreaks of disease in some of the buildings they are involved in.

Evictions can also cause health problems. This year, several people were evicted from a building in Berea. Actstop supplied tents for the people but these were pulled down almost immediately by the police. The evictees were later moved to a church where there were not enough toilets, and living space was at a premium. Evictions often occur during the winter and families are left on the street in freezing weather.



Angry residents protest against the eviction of 12 black families from a block of flats in Hillbrow. In defiance, they then moved the belongings of the families back into the flats.



Actstop meets with tenants' committee to discuss the problems of living in "grey areas" under apartheid.

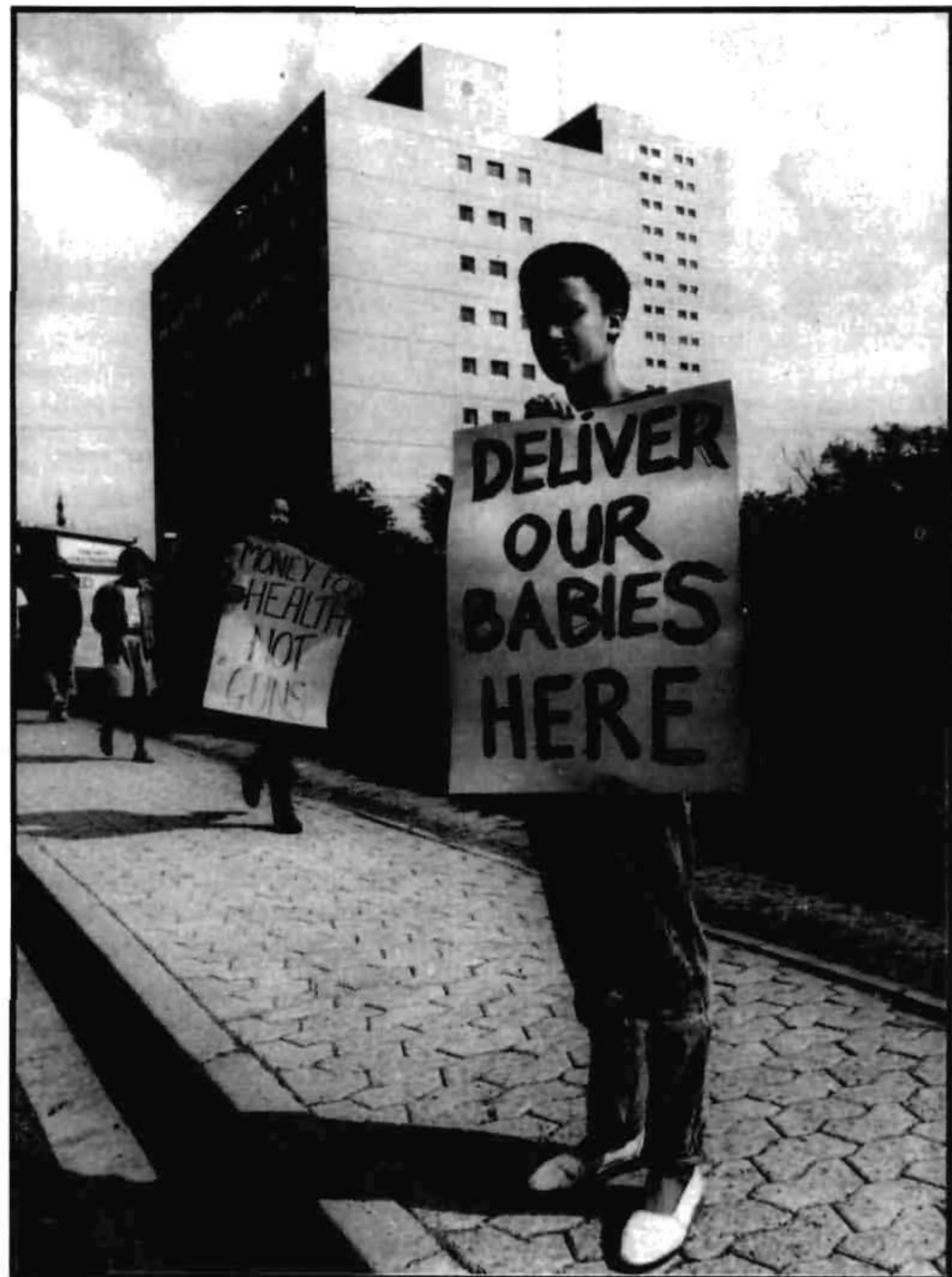
Access to medical facilities

One of the major concerns of black people living in the inner city is access to medical facilities. There is no provincial hospital in the Johannesburg city centre that has a pre-natal and paediatric facility for black inner city dwellers. The nearest hospital for these facilities is Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto which is at least 20 kilometres away. Many tenants living in Johannesburg are unaware that Hillbrow Hospital does not offer these facilities. One local resident said that she had a hospital behind her and one diagonally across the road. "I just assumed in an emergency (she is seven months pregnant) that they would take me to the nearest one."

The ongoing defiance campaign has highlighted the inadequate facilities offered to the majority of the population. Actstop has actively encouraged black people living in Johannesburg to go to the "white" Johannesburg General Hospital should they need medical attention.

Living conditions and apartheid

Actstop believes that the authorities, far from trying to alleviate the problem, have exacerbated it with their latest creation of "grey areas" which will only lead to more overcrowding and a decline in the standard of health. Apartheid has caused a housing shortage, and a lack of education and health facilities for the majority of the population. It is only through the abolition of the Group Areas Act and all other discriminatory laws that the tremendous demand for black housing will abate and living conditions improve.



The Mass Democratic Movement's defiance campaign - protesting outside the Johannesburg Hospital.