

AGM - IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

GRASSROOTS held its second annual general meeting on March 5, 6 and 7 at the Maryland Centre in Hanover Park. Present were more than 80 delegates from local worker and community organisations. The commitment of these delegates ensured that many hours were spent discussing the problems experienced in producing the newsletter. In this article, Grassroots looks at some of the issues raised and the debates surrounding them in the hope that this will provide a basis for further discussion amongst interested groups.

A community newspaper has to give its readers an *alternative* interpretation of their experiences. Grassroots must therefore not only write about the victories gained by the communities but also about the defeats they have suffered.

This was the message which Durban lawyer,

Mr Zac Yacoob, brought to the congress on its opening night.

Mr Yacoob, who spoke on alternative media, said that the commercial press did not hesitate to highlight the defeats suffered by the people negatively. It would thus be important for Grassroots to give adequate explanations of these defeats and in so doing, place them in a proper context.

Mr Yacoob also said that Grassroots must guard against becoming issue orientated. There was a need to give more attention to ongoing activities through which organisations could be sustained.

The paper should be aware of the limitations of community organisations and should not place people's hopes completely within these confines. (The message in Grassroots often is that through standing together, the people will succeed. But this is

not the final answer to every problem.)

His talk set the tone for the weekend. The hours of discussion which followed threw up very many important questions, some of which have yet to be resolved.

The adjourned AGM on April 4 looked at some of these questions:

• Should Grassroots take advertising from big multinational firms?

Grassroots policy has been not to accept advertising from such firms but to give preference to small businesses in black areas. This policy directive was taken to prevent the project becoming dependent on big advertisers who could in turn influence the content of the paper.

The advertising representative reported to the congress that he had exhausted the local market and needed to go to multinational firms. This proposal led to much heated debate.

Some delegates felt

that if Grassroots wanted to survive, it had to take whatever adverts it could get. They argued that it was not a crucial issue as long as the advertisers did not influence the content of the paper in any way.

It would also free the office staff to concentrate on other essential tasks such as distribution.

Pressure

Others warned that there were dangers in becoming dependent in any way on the big firms. This could result in less effort being made to generate alternative funds. It would in other words be an easy option.

If big firms controlled a large portion of advertising, they could exert pressure on Grassroots not to cover a strike or other important worker issues, it was said.

• Should Grassroots carry news of an overtly political nature?

Some delegates felt

that the paper was far too low-keyed and should cover political events where there is community involvement.

Others argued against this saying that this was not the forum for overt politics. Other alternative media, such as SASPU National adequately catered for these needs.

The value of Grassroots, they said, lay in helping to build very basic organisation in the community and at the work place.

• Should Grassroots use the names of people in leadership positions.

When Grassroots was started, it was decided not to build up individuals into leadership positions. There were very few organisations at the time and it was necessary rather to promote the idea of the importance of organisation rather than individual leaders.

But since then, the secretary reported, ma-

ny organisations have mushroomed in the Western Cape with true grassroots leadership emerging in the process.

By not using names, the paper was not necessarily protecting local leaders who were already exposed within their communities. It would just mean that the paper would continue to publish opinions that were faceless, without life.

The general feeling of the delegates to the congress on this matter was that names should be used in consultation with the affected organisation.

• It was suggested by the newsgathering committee, that less time be spent on reading stories which are straightforward. Instead newsgathering meetings should focus attention on the most controversial stories, with others being scrutinised by the office.

Some delegates objected to this, saying

that this would reduce the involvement of all members in all stories.

Others argued that time was wasted on reading through stories which the members more often than not approved of. These stories in any case were submitted by organisations with the approval of their committees.

Presenting all stories to the meeting did not necessarily imply a greater democracy.

It amounted in fact to less time being devoted to critical debate with the whole process becoming an exercise in getting through a number of stories.

Delegates were also urged to elect permanent representatives to attend newsgathering meetings for at least three consecutive issues to ensure continuity. It was felt that too many different people attend the meetings making it difficult to develop a common understanding.

Assisting with tasks

GRASSROOTS will employ two more people in this year. The one person will be required to assist with the tasks related to bringing out the newspaper - newsgathering, production, distribution and workshops.

With the paper expanding at a constant pace, more and more assistance was being required by the office staff. The situation would be eased if somebody were employed on a full-time basis.

A second person would be employed to work specifically in the

African areas where Grassroots was particularly weak.

It was reported at the congress that numerous attempts had been made to arrange meetings with people, to get community representatives to attend Grassroots general and newsgathering meetings and to build a strong distribution network in the townships. These did not prove very successful.

With a full-time person being employed, it was hoped that more coverage could be given to matters affecting people in these local areas.



Delegates taking a break from the Grassroots Conference recently held at the Maryland Centre, Hanover Park.

... more advice, humour

GRASSROOTS will carry analytical stories this year with more attention being given to defeats suffered by local organisations.

This was one of the many resolutions taken at the congress held a few weeks ago.

It was also agreed that earlier proposals for more humorous articles and exposes of conditions in areas, be implemented.

Delegates accepted the proposal by the newsgathering committee that the content of the centrespread not be limited to organisational problems; that it not be rigidly defined but left to discretion of a special committee subject to the newsgathering committee.

People participating

in Grassroots need more skills. Workshops therefore had to be linked to that aspect, it was decided.

It was also agreed that a manual on how to produce newsletters be drawn up and that the entire Grassroots operation be documented in the form of slides.

To assist the advice committee which draws up stories for the advice pages, it was suggested that a roster to visit local organisations be drawn up so that the committee can get feedback and input for these pages.

It was also agreed that more attention be given to street and shop sales with an effort being made to obtain feedback from distributors.

Wide support for detainees

A meeting of over 600 people endorsed the National Declaration of Detentions on March 20 at St. Marks' Church Hall in Athlone.

The Declaration was the focus of a National Week of Solidarity with Detainees called by Parents' Support Committees in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town from March 13 - 20.

During the week, two basic demands were made - a call for the release of all detainees, and for an end to security laws. Also thousands of signatures were collected.

The meeting was the highlight of a week of activities in Cape Town.

Over 600 people, mainly youth, listened to speeches, drama and poetry highlighting the plight of detainees. There are over 200 people in detention at the moment.

A representative of the General Workers' Union told the meeting that detentions were part of an undemocratic society. A government that rules against the will of the people had to resort to terror, she said. The unions were one of many progressive organisations affected by detentions.

Dr David Webster, of the Johannesburg Detainees' Parents Support Committee, said: "Every detention mo-

bilizes tens of thousands of supporters. We act out of a sense of responsibility to our colleagues, not out of charity. We have a duty to carry on their work."

Honourable

He named four broad groups who had been hit by detentions: progressive trade unionists, community leaders, students and youth.

"We know the detainees to be honourable and democratic people," he said, "and of the highest integrity."

Dr Webster warned that there would be trials soon. "But we say

the laws are on trial, and they are unjust laws. The laws made criminals out of democrats. We therefore must not call for their charge or release, but for the immediate and unconditional release of all detainees and prisoners of apartheid," he told the meeting to long applause.

Wantu Zenzile of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) urged people to unite.

"Detentions and repression call for greater clarity and action from the people. All democrats must join in a non-racial struggle to end oppression," he said.

'Detentions and repression call for greater clarity and action from the people'

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