

The Role of the Black Sash (Port Elizabeth Branch)
in the Walmer Removals and Pebco detentions.

Last year in Port Elizabeth saw a quickening of political activity, fanned by a deepening sense of outrage at imposed, unwanted citizenship of this, that or the other "homeland", resentment at an increase in rentals by the East Cape Administration Board without an improvement in services and without consulting its Community Council - itself another irritant. 1979 was also marked by a determination that an entire township of people would not allow itself to be removed and by a demonstration of solidarity from all quarters with this tiny township of Walmer, threatened by a beurocracy wanting to tidy up the map. It saw a major industrial stay-away sparked by the dismissal at supervisory level, of a man recognised by a large section of the population as their leader, a heady succession of rallies in the black townships addressed by the newly-formed Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (Pebco), a refusal by blacks to back down from demands that all strikers be reinstated and that discriminatory attitudes of white workers be eliminated. White workers, on the other hand, incensed that Black workers should be compensated by the company for time out on strike and doubtless scornful of their management's parleying with Black workers, pointed to Black attitudes they found offensive and themselves threatened to go on strike. As tensions mounted, meetings, thousands strong, continued to be held in the Black townships, addressed by Mr Thozamile Botha, whose dismissal had led to a walk-out by fellow workers - a quiet man who insisted on orderliness and non-violence. White ears suddenly pricked up to catch the words emanating from the townships. They heard attacks on White liberals, churches, Urban Foundation, some of which were retracted. It was heady stuff and mothers lifted toddlers on their shoulders to see the speakers and prevent them being injured in the tight pack of bodies.

At a critical point in the industrial dispute, the Walmer removal issue came to a head. The removal of this 60-year-old established township had been on the drawing board for years but the matter was precipitated early last year when the aged Community Councillor for Walmer, who incidentally lives in Zwide, was sent to apprise residents of their removal. Their reaction was instantaneous and left no doubt as to their rejection of the idea. A Black Sash memorandum on the issue was handed over to Dr Piet Koornhof by the National President and members raised the matter in letters to the local press, setting out the spuriousness of official reasoning and drawing attention to the hardships that would be suffered by residents, some of whom would have to leave better houses, many of whom would be further removed from places of employment, all of whom would be deprived of a village life in familiar surroundings near clinics, churches and, amongst other things, a number of competitively-minded supermarkets within easy walking distance. In collaboration with other bodies, churches and individuals from both White and Black sections of Walmer, an umbrella organisation was formed - the Save Walmer Committee.

This committee supplied facts to Dr Koorhof and asked for the removal decision to be rescinded. Replies were received from Dr Morrison, his deputy, who in turn supplied the committee with facts which were seriously questioned by the committee. No explanations were forthcoming in reply to specific questions, such as a request for substantiation of the allegation that the decision had the approval of the Community Council. A complaint to Dr Koorhof that his deputy was failing to deal adequately with the situation brought yet another two-line letter from Dr Morrison's office. On a visit to Uitenhage, Dr Morrison was asked by a reporter whether he had decided on the fate of Walmer. He replied that he had, that Walmer would have to go, but he sent the comforting message: "Tell all those do-gooders in P.E. that Morrison is on the job." This was followed by a Sunday Times article on the doomed township. Reaction was instantaneous. On an informal level, the Pebco official who also liased with Save Walmer Committee and took the reporter through the townships, was seized by unknown men, had a balaclava cap pulled over his head and was driven away for questioning. Early on the Tuesday morning following the Sunday Times report, the East Cape Administration Board was informed of a proposed official tour and a flurry of telegrams was despatched from Pretoria issuing invitations to all interested parties to visit the Black townships and attend a seminar at which the factual aspects of the case would be discussed. This presumably eliminated humanitarian considerations or appeals to the emotions, and while providing all groups with an opportunity to put their case, would also provide the Department with the opportunity of demonstrating its reasonableness. As expected, an invitation was not sent to Pebco. Questioned on this by the newspapers, Mr Louis Koch, Chairman of the East Cape Administration Board, confirmed that he would not be inviting that group. Pebco replied with disdain that it would not have attended anyway since it did not believe in negotiation.

Significantly, and out of the blue it seemed, the Black Sash received not only the telegraphed invitation but also a letter sent in apparent reply to either its original memorandum or to a telegram from the P.E. Branch to Dr Koorhof saying simply: "You promised not to move anyone against his or her will. Why are you moving the people of Walmer?" The letter came from Dr Morrison's office and reiterated the Government's firm intention of moving the township while admitting that hardship would be caused to the female workforce, the majority of whom were employed in domestic service in neighbouring suburbs. The letter also alleged that the local office was being "inundated" with requests from Walmer residents who wished to move to Zwide 4, the sprawling residential area on the other side of the city, 22 kilometres away. The Black Sash immediately countered with the statement that certain lodgers who had gone to seek what they had hoped would be a better life in houses at Zwide had since had to revert to shack dwellings in either Zwide or back in Walmer since they could not all afford the higher rents. Moreover the Sash publicly stated that it was by no means certain it would bother to attend the official tour since, according to the correspondence it had received, it seemed certain that the Government was adamant and that the tour was likely to be a futile exercise in public relations by the Department. It also made the point that, of course people would ask to go to Zwide now when told they would have to move to Coega later, Coega being even further away.

