

## BLACK SASH CAPE WESTERN REGION

### FACT PAPER ON WORK OF DEPENDANTS' CONFERENCE

Dependants' Conference in Cape Town was started in June 1963. It was at the time of a wave of Paqo and PAC arrests, when it was estimated that over 1,500 men were in jail. Up to that time the Defence and Aid Fund had provided legal defence for people charged with political offences and had also given aid to their families. The avalanche of arrests was so great that D and A felt themselves unable to continue with the aid side of their work and so requested the Institute of Race Relations to call a meeting of interested organisations in the hopes that a new body would be formed to meet the crisis.

The Institute called a meeting and over 16 bodies and organisations were represented at it. These bodies included the Red Cross, Child Life, Board of Aid, Shawco, Quakers, Black Sash, Cafda, Department of Bantu Affairs and representatives from the two local township administrations. It was agreed that a crisis existed and a loose body to be known as the Dependants Conference was formed to arrange for the support of families of political prisoners while the breadwinner was in jail.

For the first few months most of the support was administered by the Red Cross, Cafda, Shawco and the Board of Aid. Slowly a uniform method of payment evolved and different rates were paid to families in rural areas, semi-rural areas, (such as Wellington and Paarl) and urban areas such as Cape Town itself.

When Dependants Conference was formed in 1963 all the men whose families were being assisted received the maximum sentence of three years as they were all charged for either belonging to an illegal organisation or for attending a meeting of such an organisation. It was therefore never envisaged that there would be any necessity for the work to continue when the breadwinner was released at the end of his three year sentence. This however has proved to have been a false hope. From June 1966 the men started to be released and most of them were escorted direct from jail to the Transkei or Ciskei and many of them were then banned or restricted to a specific area for a period of two years. In most cases their banning orders precluded them from taking up any form of employment and certainly did not permit them to leave the Transkei as contract workers. The original intention had been to continue support for the family for three months after the breadwinner was released in order to give him a chance to rehabilitate himself. It very soon proved to be impossible to carry out this policy and we are still supporting 24 families of men released in 1966. Even after the two year banning order was lifted these men have had continuous difficulties in finding re-employment either within the Transkei or as contract workers.

Two years after the formation of Dependants Conference in Cape Town a national meeting was called as it was found that similar organisations were doing this type of relief work throughout the country. In all the other areas the committees were associated with church bodies. Funds to finance the work had always come from overseas sources and it was felt that a national body to receive and distribute funds to the areas where they were most needed had become very necessary. A National Committee was formed and was part of Dependants Conference in Cape Town. At that stage there was no close liason between the various committees as to the amount of aid and assessment of a family's needs. The committee purely distributed the funds they received to where they were most needed.

As the years went on the funds were more and more exclusively channelled through the World Council of Churches in Geneva to Inter-Church Aid in Johannesburg and thence to Dependants Conference Cape Town. So that in 1970 Dependants Conference (which by that stage represented far fewer organisations than at its inception), approached the Western Province Council of Churches with a view to the work coming under the umbrella of the church. After several months of negotiation the S.A. Council of Churches agreed to take over the work and committees in the various areas all became sub-committees of the local Council of Churches. A meeting was held in Port Elizabeth in August 1970 to which representatives from all over the country came and for the first time a uniform scale of aid was laid down together with procedures for assessing family needs. It was further agreed that all committees be known as Dependants Conference.

As to how the work is actually carried out - the country is divided into 6 areas and from Cape Town we support all our local Dependants and also all the families of political and ex-political prisoners in the Transkei. This would appear to be an odd arrangement but has arisen historically because the vast majority of the men originally arrested in the Cape Town area either had their homes in the Transkei or were sent there on their release.

Families receiving assistance from us are required to fill in forms twice a year which then have to be attested by a responsible person such as an attorney, headmaster, minister of religion etc. when it is not possible to have a personal interview which is the case with all our Transkeian clients. From the information received in the forms the families' needs are then assessed and the maximum monthly grant is R16 - R5 for the first member of the family and R2 for every other member up to the maximum. Education is only paid for the children of men still serving their sentences. Applications for assistance for education of children of released prisoners are channelled to other funds. No rents are paid. Wives are provided with one third class rail ticket a year to visit their husbands in jail.

Two aspects of the work which cause endless headaches are the need for personal case investigation and the need for rehabilitation. As to the first, this is possible in some areas, particularly urban ones, but in the rural areas it is extremely difficult and we have to rely on the information supplied in the forms. May I say here that the honesty of most of these people living below the breadline is very heart-warming?

On the question of rehabilitation, various attempts have been made so far, sadly, with no success. It is felt very strongly that for men who have served their sentence, then been further penalised for two years and then find themselves unable to get employment, receipt of breadline subsistence must have a most debilitating, dehumanising and demoralising effect. This is a problem which various efforts have so far failed to solve and one can only hope that the future will produce a solution.

As to the numbers involved in this work, Dependants Conference supports more than 500 families throughout the country and with various new cases being heard and the lack of employment for ex-prisoners, this number does not seem likely to decrease in the near future.

The Cape Town Committee support 154 families. The bread-winners of 94 of these have already been released. We support 2 families where the prisoners have a life sentence and one who will only be released in 1985. 15 of our cases are widows and their

children whose husbands have either died in jail or after release or received the death sentence, and there is no Government Pension whatsoever available for these people. Where it is felt that any of our clients are entitled either to an Old Age Pension or a Disability Grant, every effort is made to help them obtain it, but with a lamentable lack of success.

Despite various Government statements in and out of court that official funds are available to families supported by the Dependants Conference, from the date of our inception we have found this not to be the case, as efforts have been made continuously over the years to channel clients to apply for Government funds. South Africa must be one of the few countries in the world where it is necessary to have had to form and continue to run an organisation such as ours. And the fact that over the years Dependants Conference has been entirely supported by money from overseas is an indictment of White South Africa. Since the South African Council of Churches assumed responsibility for the work an attempt at local fund raising has been started through the churches and a pamphlet distributed; so far only R2,000 has been received.

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