

UNIBELL SQUATTER CAMP, CAPE TOWN 1978

Unibell Squatter camp was a place of refuge for some 2000 African families in January 1978 when the Peninsula Bantu Affairs Administration Board Chairman, Brigadier van der Westhuizen, announced that it was a health hazard, therefore would be demolished "soon". Notices were distributed to the inhabitants warning them to move "forthwith", a mobile office was provided to issue rail warrants to the homelands, and clearing operations were done to facilitate access.

Situated on a sandy L-shaped area of government land in Bellville South (Proteaville) the camp had been in existence for at least six years. The site had the advantage of combining low visibility with easy access to work opportunities (nearby factories) and public transport. Overgrown with Port Jackson wattle it is bounded on the east by an industrial railway branch line and Coloured Affairs Department educational institutions, on the south by the Bellville-Sarepta-Salt River loop railway line used only by black passengers (the nearest railway station being named Unibell), on the west by the ("coloured") University of the Western Cape and on the north by the "coloured" Dutch Reformed Theological School.

Water was obtained from the adjacent built-up areas, but no services (night-soil and refuse removal) were available. Vehicle access was officially limited to a road leading off the Modderdam arterial road, but the variety of cars and trucks owned by the squatters also used other routes.

According to a September 1977 survey many of the heads of household had lived in single quarters in Langa and Nyanga previously, and in many cases the families had lived together (illegally) in Cape Town for 5-8 years. Nearly 80% of the families were from the Transkei, the rest from the Ciskei. (2)

Although numbering of shacks, inspections and demolitions of individual shacks had gone on intermittently, the camp had increased in size year by year. From early 1977 it was under the same threat as Modderdam and Werkgenot squatter camps (nearby), which were demolished in August. At that time notices to quit had also been issued to Unibell residents, and September 15 was named as D-day and the people braced themselves for the crisis.

However intensive lobbying and negotiations between the Transkei Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs in Pretoria led to a stay of execution. During this "grace period" many influential citizens and groups continued to press for a change in the policy that condemns most Africans working in the Western Cape to a life of virtually permanent "bachelordom" (49 weeks each year in single quarters, 2-3 weeks a year with their families). During this same period many refugees from the demolished Modderdam and Werkgenot camps, including some who had been in tents on church premises or accommodated in private homes, moved into Unibell. As a result the camp expanded further in size and in density of population.

Employment conditions of Africans in Cape Town, as studied by Graaff & Maree in 1977, show that the main occupational groups of migrants workers were:

construction	24%
manufacturing	20%
transport	12%
commerce	12%

In all, some 71% of contract workers (migrants) did unskilled manual work and had a wage level (nett) of R21-23 per week. (1)

Officially/.. 2/..

Officially numbered shacks total 1900, but some of the numbered series have been demolished by PWD officials and others have been extended or erected: so no one knows precisely how many dwellings or family units there are in the camp. Estimates go as high as 2300 shacks and 20 000 people.

At the time of the Maree-Cornell survey (3) some 58% of the labour force in the same were in formal employment. Of the remaining 42% many were probably engaged in the informal sector - there were many "shops" and "services" in the camp, meeting people's needs for food, fuel, clothing, etc. (A recent Clermont Natal study showed that shack dwellers may derive as much as 55% of their income from informal sector activities (4)).

Social conditions and amenities

Although the wood-and-iron shacks are elementary in design and construction they show many signs of care and skill. Windows have been fitted, inner walls are covered with wallpaper or brightly-pictured stiff paper from advertising material or glossy magazines. There are gardens and fences, many toilet structures, and much evidence of a desire to make the best of an unpromising situation. This contrasts markedly with the apathy and vandalism from which many Cape Flats townships are notorious. (According to NICRO the Cape Flats has one of the highest recorded crime rates in the world.)

Since early 1977 a junior primary school has attempted to provide rudimentary education for the children. With the help of the Urban Foundation a secondhand structure was obtained and erected by the people and officially opened in November 1977. The Nonzwakazi School caters for 200 children and staffed by five women teachers, and the structure also serves as a community centre and venue for committee meetings.

A biweekly clinic, run in the home of a Unibell resident on a voluntary basis by two doctors, catered for many common ailments, and an "ambulance" service assisted patients referred to the Tygerberg Hospital (five minutes by car but 1½-2 hours journey by public transport). A new Shawco mobile clinic, largely financed by an oil-company, for use in squatter camps, began operating in Unibell in January 1978.

The camp has had several organised church communities with services and meetings being held in people's homes or in the open-air, with local leadership and assistance of clergy and lay people from neighbouring parishes.

A residents' committee has provided overall social consultation and control. While lacking in protective amenities such as street lighting and police patrols, the camps has been remarkably crime-free. This has been due largely to the cohesiveness of the community, the people being acutely aware of their vulnerability and dependence on one another.

ALTERNATIVES

A. The case for recognising the camps

Legislation exists for declaring the camp an emergency camp and providing it with the necessary basic services, in return for the payment of a levy.

This was done in July 1976 in the case of the equally controversial Crossroads squatter camp east of Nyanga township. Divisional Council reports (Medical Officer of Health, Squatter Control) reflect a very positive relationship between the local authority and the squatter community numbering some 17-20 000 people.

Both the Urban Foundation and the Urban Problems Research Unit at UCT were involved in the self-help effort of the people there to provide a second school and community centre. Speeches delivered at the official opening of the school on November 26 1977 stressed the positive nature of Crossroads camp as "a squatter solution to the urban housing problem". Documentation on this theme is becoming available from both those sources (5).

B. The case against recognising the camp

The Bantu Affairs Administration Board (Peninsula) is committed to implementing the government's influx control policy at whatever cost. Its chairman has argued repeatedly that recognition of Crossroads camp has led to an increase in the population there, in contravention of the government's policy of restricting African influx into the Western Cape.

The Brigadier has made it clear that the Board believes that its task is to make life intolerable for Africans illegally in the Cape Town area so that they will voluntarily return to the homelands.

(Space does not permit of detailed discussion of the issues, but a wealth of literature is now available. See bibliography (6)).

In brief, the case for demolishing Unibell rests on total rejection of the desire of the African migrant workers needed by the Cape Town economy, for family life. Equally, the case against demolishing it rests on the workers' claim to have their families with them. In moral terms this can be validated in relation to both the Christian teaching to which the South African government professes allegiance and universal human rights. In economic terms it can be validated as feasible through the use of self-help schemes and the graduated phasing out of migrant labour, resulting in the emergence of a settled African labour force integrated into the Cape economy **TO THE BENEFIT OF A L L CONCERNED.**

Far from being a storm in a teacup, the proposed demolition of the Unibell squatter camp provides another incontrovertible exposé of the callousness and moral bankruptcy of the apartheid regime; therefore challenges all who seek a better way for South Africa to become actively involved in the struggle, here-and-now, for liberation and a just social order.

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References:

1. Graaff J & Marce J Residential & Migrant African Workers in Cape Town (SALDRU/UCT 1977)
2. Maree J & Cornell J Sample Survey of Squatters in Unibell, Sept.1977
3. ibid. (SALDRU/UCT 1977)
4. Erwin 1977 cited in Maree & Cornell (ibid.)
5. Urban Foundation 1 Dorp St Cape Town (ph.22-2341)
Urban Problems Research Unit "C" sharp Cottage Rosebank Campus UCT
or Werdmuller Centre Main Road Claremont (65-4370) (69-4351)
6. Detailed bibliography in Nash M Home? an introduction to housing problems and Urban development in Greater Cape Town (CFCIA/BSR 1977)
See also August 1977 issue of South African Outlook on Modderdam,
August & September issues of Kairos (South African Council of Churches)
& contact Cape Flats Committee for Interim Accommodation (CFCIA)
at St. Saviour's Church Hall, Brooke Street Claremont 7700.
Urbanisation & demographic trends are contained in Nash M Church and City: Cape 2000 (mimeographed)