

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 liaised 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.

Mr Thozamile Botha had initially attacked the Save Walmer Committee as being largely a group of white liberals. Older Pebco committee members objected and a meeting was sought with the Save Walmer Committee at which it was decided that while Pebco would maintain its non-negotiating stance, the Save Walmer Committee would in the meantime continue to negotiate.

As the expected visit by Dr Morrison drew nearer, Pebco decided to act on the Walmer front. It called for a general strike on the day of the visit and a popular demonstration in support of the threatened township. It was expected that thousands of demonstrators would arrive by bus or on foot from the other side of the city.

In the meanwhile intensive talks were being held on the industrial front. Then came news of the breaking of the deadlock. Through compromise, diplomacy and a willingness on the part of Ford to meet the demands of the strikers, agreement was reached. There was an immediate easing of the tension, detectable in Pebco statements. Since jobs had again been guaranteed it might be foolhardy for those newly reinstated to jeopardise the delicate agreement or, in a time of alarming unemployment to call for a general strike. Pebco leaders indicated they might call off the strike. But Black apprehension was running high. An executive member of the Walmer branch of the Black Civic Organisation was held briefly for questioning. "We're waiting for them to arrest our leaders," said a young musician and Pebco supporter who declared his intention of taking part in the demonstration by standing there and blowing his trumpet - "just to express my feelings." The intention certainly was that the demonstration should be peaceful.

Conflicting reports meanwhile appeared in the newspapers. One said Dr Morrison would be coming. Another said it had never been intended that he should. Various groups who had taken it for granted that the discussions would be on a ministerial level considered withdrawing in the event of his not being present. At this point the Black Sash issued a statement to the effect that it considered the tour a waste of time since the outcome had already been decided in advance anyway.

Four days after the announcement of the intended strike, when it seemed likely to be called off, and when the staging of the tour seemed uncertain, Pebco leaders went to Walmer. On their arrival they were arrested - an action Sash criticised as hamhanded and provocative. Not only did the arrests take place in front of a waiting crowd but the handcuffs were clamped on so tightly that Mr Botha had to be taken to the Fire Station to have them sawn off. In the event, the crowd was remarkably patient and restrained, waiting for the return of executive members. The standing instruction was "No violence". As it happened, eight windows of a bus were stoned and an occupant injured - an unfortunate occurrence but one that can hardly be described as wildly reactive. As people sought shelter in their homes, police continued to drive through the township shooting tear gas.

When it was announced the following day that the official tour would take place under armed escort, participants withdrew from what they considered a compromising situation. The Board cancelled the tour.

A few nights after the event, police in camouflage uniform returned to Walmer at midnight on what was termed a routine crime check. People were sworn at and rudely addressed, food was knocked from tables, doors and windows were smashed and cupboards pulled down. The father of one boy whose hair was sticking out was asked if his son was a terrorist and where he hid his guns. Another was asked to show his poll tax, something that an enforcer of the law should have known was no longer required. A protest was made to the regional chief of police by the Save Walmer Committee, who assured the delegation that his men have orders to behave civilly. He blamed the Transvalers! Earlier, Sash members had displayed a poster demanding

Remove Apartheid, Not People.

With the prolonged detention of Pebco leaders Thozamile Botha, journalist Mono Badela and Phalo Tshume and the shorter detention of sports administrator and activist Dan Qeque, the Sash held placards demanding that the men be charged or released and stating that

Detention without trial is Tyranny.

Now that the men are no longer in detention but have been house-arrested, our placard reads

House Arrest is Punishment without Trial.

After these happenings, what next?

Dr Morrison anticipated the expected PFP attack on Walmer removals by stating that a shortage of housing had set back the date for removals and that no one would be forced to move but that in time development in the area might necessitate the departure from the area of those residents who had not moved earlier. Although some residents experienced a sense of relief, the general feeling was that the problem had simply been deferred, that this was simply a more subtle way to skin the cat. The Black Sash expressed scepticism about the reassurances given, pointing out that similar statements had been made about people at Klipfontein - and they had been carted away. Without a change of heart there is little doubt that people will in the end be forced to move, if not physically, then by other means. Dr Jannie Wessels, Chairman of the East Cape Administration Board stated in the press that those unwilling to move might be prosecuted under the Slum Clearance Act or health regulations. He has since stated the intention of the Board to move people out gradually until numbers are too low to warrant the continued provision of services. It is intended that a delegation of churchmen and residents should call on Dr Koornhof after the parliamentary session to request him to reverse the decision of eventual and undramatised removal. In the meantime residents are assisting the Urban Foundation in a survey of how best it could assist in upgrading the township.

On the political front, the rump executive of Pebco has experienced a weakening of support. Its call for a liquor boycott was ill-advised and failed. Numbers attending meetings are no longer overwhelming. But youth wings have been formed and causes of dissatisfaction abound. We hope solutions will be found - soon.