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CAMPAIGN AGAINST PASSES IN THE TRANSVAAL IN 1919

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The demonstrations against passes in the Transvaal in 1919 was the first mass movement and the first attempt at non-violent resistance organized by the ANC. It is of great importance in the history of the ANC, then called South African Native National Congress (SANNC), and of the liberation struggle, but has received little attention from scholars.

In July 1918, the SANNC Executive Committee passed a resolution calling on the Government to abolish the pass laws which shackled African men with contract passes. The Transvaal Congress leaders raised the matter at meetings with the Prime Minister and other Ministers, but the Government took no action.

The Johannesburg branch of the Congress then decided to appeal to the African people to throw away their passes and court arrest in order to obtain attention to their grievances. They had realised, like Gandhi in 1906, that appeals and deputations were ineffective without some force behind them. Other Witwatersrand branches of the Congress followed the example of Johannesburg.

The passive resistance movement began on 30 March 1919 when a mass meeting of two thousand Africans in Vrededorp decided to reject the passes. The next day, about three thousand Africans demonstrated in front of the Johannesburg pass office and left sacks full of passes at that office. It was an entirely peaceful demonstration. But police charged the crowd with batons and arrested hundreds of people, including “constables” appointed by the ANC to keep the demonstration non-violent.

Three leaders of the movement – Horatio I. Budd Mbelle, W. Dunjwa and P.J. Motsoakae – went to the office of *The Star* on 1 April to explain the movement. According to *The Star*:

“Asked why they had resolved on passive resistance, Mbelle said they had tried to get redress through making representations from time to time for the alleviation of the grievous difficulties under which the Natives in the Transvaal laboured, but all their efforts had been without avail. Asked what their principal grievances were, the deputation stated that apart from many minor difficulties connected with the administration of the pass law in the Transvaal, their grievances could be grouped under two heads:

1. The denial of the rights of citizenship.
2. The denial, through the operation of the colour bar, of the rights of ordinary human beings...

“Asked what their programme was, they said they would insist on order being maintained by their people. They had formed a group of special constables to collect sticks, and every weapon which any of the Natives may be possessed of, and from every platform the Natives would be told that there were to be no shouts or threats or anything that would incite public feeling. In case of arrest, the Natives were told that they must submit quietly, and must go to gaol. No picketing had been authorised, and the Natives had simply been invited to stop work....

“‘We hold’, said Mbelle, ‘that the Pass Law is nothing more or less than a system of slavery.’...

“Questioned as to the extent to which they propose to carry the movement, the deputation said they simply invited all Natives, whether working in stores or in houses to stop work, and invitations were also being sent to the Natives working on the mines.”¹

More than two hundred Africans were brought to court and charged with disturbing the peace or inciting the workers to strike. Crowds of Africans outside the court were attacked by mounted police injuring thousands of Africans, including women. Mary Benson quotes a letter to *The Star* by Willaim Hosken,² an eye witness.

“Police, mounted and on foot, arrived, to be greeted by hearty cheers from the Natives, then some booing, followed by 'absolute quiet'. Not a single hostile move was made by the Natives.

“Then - 'to my astonishment', said Hosken, 'the mounted police suddenly spurred their horses and charged on the crowd'. The police used their staves vigorously, riding over Natives - who included women. Whereupon a civilian began 'slashing with a stick at every Native he came near, and finally struck a Native woman a severe blow'. Hosken remonstrated and demanded the man's name but was ignored. He heard one bystander exclaiming: 'Would I had a

¹ Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964*, Volume I, pages 106-107.

² Mr. Hosken, a liberal politician, had been chairman of a committee formed in 1909 of European sympathisers with the Indian passive resistance led by Gandhi.

machine-gun, and I could then do some execution.' As he went along the street he came across more whites intercepting Natives."³

Protests continued in Johannesburg and other towns for several days. White vigilantes attacked Congress meetings, some of them shooting at the Africans with impunity. About five hundred more Africans were arrested and sentenced to fines, imprisonment with hard labour or lashes. Nearly all those sentenced to fines chose to go to prison.

The Government appointed a one-man commission to investigate the events and it exonerated the police "in view of difficult circumstances".

S.M. Makgatho, in his Presidential Address to the SANNC on 6 May 1919, called on the Government to abolish the Transvaal and Free State passes, and denounced the violence against the demonstrators in the Transvaal:

"They (Africans) were driven like cattle, trampled by mounted policemen under their horses' hoofs, shot at by white volunteers, and some men and women are in their graves as a result of their refusal to buy any more passes....

"Thousands of Natives are suffering imprisonment at the present time, and, in spite of the law, many thousands since last month are courting arrest by working without any passes."

Referring to the excuse of the authorities that passes help the Natives, as they serve to identify the dead and stop crimes, he pointed out:

"... there were no passes in Johannesburg before 1893, and there was less crime proportionately in those days; but since the multiplication of passes Johannesburg has been known as the University of Crime. Again, like the Cape Natives, who carry no passes, white men also die in Johannesburg, and it has never been suggested that they, too, should carry identification passes."

He continued:

"No mention is made of the amount of revenue raised by the Government from our people by means of this badge of slavery. The Government retains a share of the spoil. The Transvaal Provincial Council alone gets £340,000 annually, from the scant earnings of our poorly-paid people, to build and maintain schools for white children while our educational needs remain unattended."

³ Mary Benson, *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright* (International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, London, November 1985), page 40

This passive resistance of 1919, inspired by the success of the anti-pass campaign of Free State women and the Indian satyagraha of 1906-14, could not be sustained and failed to achieve even partial success. The pass law for men, unlike the imposition of passes on women in the Free State, was integral to the contract labour system. The Government, responsive to the interests of the mine owners, did not hesitate to crush the men's passive resistance.

While Indian passive resistance had received powerful political and financial support from India, as well as some support and understanding in Britain and within the white community in South Africa, due to the patient efforts of Gandhi over several years, the African resistance could not count on such support. Even some African leaders, wedded to constitutional agitation, did little to help.

But passive resistance remained in the consciousness of African leaders. It was only after the emergence of young leaders prepared for sacrifice and the adoption of the Programme of Action in 1949, that the ANC felt that the time was ripe for mass passive resistance. The Defiance Campaign of 1952 and the anti-pass campaigns of 1960 followed. By then some whites in South Africa had allied themselves with the ANC and the South African racism was condemned internationally. But the regime was able to suppress the resistance, as it was protected by powerful foreign interests which denounced apartheid in words but acted otherwise. These campaigns, however, became dress rehearsals for the Mass Democratic Movement of the 1980s, supported by armed actions and effective international solidarity, which secured the end of passes and all other crimes against the people.

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