

# workshop on 'sash today and tomorrow'

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*The Black Sash is a group of 'intellectually powerful women and when that power is released great things can happen'.*

**T**his comment was made by an outside facilitator during the summing up at Transvaal Region's 'Sash Today and Tomorrow' workshop in October 1986.

The workshop was organised to evaluate who we are, where we are, what we think, and where we go from here. A pleasant surprise for the almost 100 members who attended was that, despite the pressures and splits in South African society, most of us are concerned about similar issues and still hold similar thoughts on them.

Netty Davidoff, a member since 1955, gave a moving opening address in which she reflected on the Black Sash through the years. Ethel Walt, Transvaal president, reminded us of Alan Paton's remark at the dedication of Sash many years ago: 'History and our

children shall defend us'.

Participants then separated into six groups, with a facilitator in each, to discuss 'Our vision of the future'. It was gloomy — a future of increased repression and ever more restrictive information control by the state. The groups saw increased state and right-wing actions against the Sash and the perceived left. (The spate of restriction orders against members already seems to bear this out.) They recognised that the country is in a situation of civil war, and that this will continue, with increased levels of violence on all sides.

The issues of necklacing and violence occupied much agonised time in all the groups. The Black Sash has always opposed violence and, 'ideally', this is still the case. Yet apartheid is a violent system, and it is recognised that much of the counter-violence is the result

of frustration after years of life under this system.

Should we be judgmental? Some felt that it is difficult to judge those in the struggle and to know their pressures. They felt unfair security force action should be condemned because we have the right to expect the police to behave in a decent way. The security forces should be trusted friends and protectors to the public. If they do not behave in an exemplary way, we should react.

Others felt there are difficulties in always criticising the government and its agents, if we don't criticise those on the left — particularly as they are working towards a future South Africa. The means, in other words, are helping to mould the end result.

Ultimately it was felt that if we do not comment on pertinent issues, particularly in our traditional fields of endeavour, it reduces the effectiveness of the Black Sash.

It was interesting to note that, despite many debates in the past about whether Sash should affiliate to other organisations, it is now more firmly felt that one of our strengths is our independence.

A second session was devoted to looking at the Sash of the future and the role that members can play in shaping it.

In summing up, the facilitators said it appears that Sash needs to increase its flow of information into the community. There seems to be a need for more creative projects and workshops, and a revamping of internal communications. They pointed out that the growth of an organisation is often tied to a charismatic leader. When that leader removes herself there tends to be a crisis and the organisation may become more bureaucratic. This does not appear to be happening in Sash, but we should be aware of this possibility. They detected a 'cry for management training and succession grooming' — vital to prepare future Sheena Duncans, Mary Burtons and Ethel Walts!

At the end of a stimulating day, the question was: 'Why have we never done this before?' Should such a workshop not become an annual event? □