

## Transvaal Sashers

# MARCH IN PROTEST

**T**HE news of South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth was received by members of the Black Sash with a sense of shock and unbelief. An emergency committee meeting was called to discuss the matter, and it was unanimously agreed that a protest demonstration should be staged as soon as possible.

It was decided that, if permission could be obtained from the City Council, we would organise a march through the streets of Johannesburg. Although Black Sash members would have been glad to associate themselves with a general protest by the citizens of Johannesburg, the absence of any lead from other organisations led us to invite members of the public to join us in a citizens' protest march. Monday,

March 20th, 1961, was decided upon as the earliest possible date.

By dint of hard work on the part of committee members, branch contacts and many individual members, everything that had to be done in the short time available was done. The City Council gave us permission to hold the march between noon and 1 p.m., and to wind it up on the steps of the City Hall with one speech only. Mrs. Dora Hill courageously agreed to be the sole speaker. We also obtained permission for the march from the Johannesburg Traffic Department, who gave us the greatest assistance throughout.

One slogan was decided upon: *The Crime—Apartheid; The Penalty—Isolation* — and we decided to use numerous posters, in English and Afrikaans alternately. At a late stage it was decided that we needed a pamphlet to give the public the whole basis of our protest, and very early on Monday morning two of our committee members took the copy to the printers, who very nobly rose to the occasion once again and let us have the pamphlets before 12 o'clock! Hundreds of telephone calls went through the branch contacts to past and present members of the Black Sash and members of the public. The newspapers were informed, and arrangements were made to have loud-speakers and our recording of the tolling bell on the steps of the City Hall.

### WHY SOUTH AFRICA IS OUT OF THE COMMONWEALTH

**W**E cannot emphasise sufficiently that although we agree that it was the rash insistence on the referendum and the forcing of the republican issue that precipitated our withdrawal (or expulsion) from the Commonwealth, it is our inhuman policy of enforced apartheid that has earned us the justified censure of the Western world. Many South Africans, and even some of our own members, do not appear to understand that while many groups and individuals in other Commonwealth countries are also guilty of the human failing of racial and group discrimination, it is only in South Africa that such discrimination is *national policy*, written into our law. However much the Nationalists may claim that the policy of "separate development" and "equal rights in their own areas" is moral and just, the fact remains that the majority of Africans, now living and working in the "White" areas, are destined to live out their lives in those areas, and cannot hope to enjoy in their lifetime the ordinary human rights that White people take for granted.

### The March

Demonstrators were asked to assemble at noon at the Scottish War Memorial at Joubert Park, the same spot from which our two great marches of protest against the Senate Act started in May and November, 1955. The march started at about 12.30 p.m., led by three members of the regional committee and preceded by traffic officers on motor bicycles, and took its way along the same route to the City Hall as that followed by the two previous marches, to the sound of slow drum beats. It is difficult to estimate the number that took part, but judging from our own contact figures and the reports in the different newspapers, there were probably between 400 and 500 marchers, including 70 or 80 men. A number of men and women joined as we proceeded on our way. When we marched six years ago, enthusiasm and encouragement accompanied us.



all the way to the City Hall; now, a solitary hand-clap here or there served only to emphasise the apathy of the watching public.

As we left Joubert Park, a car bearing a Pretoria number plate drew up, and a number of young men, apparently University students, got out and lined up beside our procession. They carried posters on long bamboo poles, but at that stage did not display them. All the way to the City Hall the intruders flanked our marchers, jostling and pushing, and evidently trying to force us away from the pavement side of the street so that they could display their own posters. It was only when they were challenged to do so by members of the public that they showed these posters, which turned out to be crude and stupid attacks on the Black Sash women. Our women showed great restraint and continued determinedly on their way, keeping firmly to the side of the street.

There seemed to be about 25 young men, led by an older man who was evidently not a student. As far as we can ascertain, they confined themselves to pushing and jostling, and the one case of "man-handling" reported to us had its humorous side. A very petite, middle-aged woman found a tall young man marching beside her, and as they approached a parked car he made a move to push in front of her and take the left-hand position. She elbowed

him out of the way and forced him to fall behind, whereupon the leader rushed up, caught the little woman by the arm and exclaimed, "How dare you assault my men!"

Several women prepared to come to her aid, but a Black Sash organiser, an even smaller woman, came up and took command of the situation. The two heroes fell back, and the "assaulter" resumed her place in the procession!

### At the City Hall

As we approached the City Hall, the counter-demonstrators suddenly took the lead, banners held prominently aloft, evidently with the intention of leading us in to the City Hall. The Black Sash leaders immediately came to a dead stop, bringing the column to a halt, and waited until the traffic officers came back and cleared the students out of the way. Unfortunately, they moved in the direction of the City Hall, and when our procession arrived they were already in position on the steps, trying to take possession of the loud-speakers and microphone. These young men, who had glibly answered all remonstrances along the route with protestations of their "democratic" right to demonstrate, now attempted to deprive the legitimate demonstrators of their democratic right to speak! It was only prompt

## PROTEST MARCH *Continued*

and determined action by some of the men who had marched with us, in forming a protective circle around Mrs. Hill, that enabled her to deliver her speech. The students were hustled off the steps, and angry members of the public seized their posters and tore them up.

Exactly at one o'clock the bells, which had been tolling at intervals, ceased, the Post Office clock struck the hour, and Mrs. Hill commenced to speak. Except for one or two catcalls, probably from the students, who were now rather subdued, her short speech was received most sympathetically and appreciatively by the audience, and it was most unfortunate that once again an unrehearsed "effect" marred the proceedings. One of the men round the microphone (he had incidentally been most helpful in routing the counter-demonstration!) now most misguidedly seized the loud-speaker and added what he no doubt intended to be a few helpful words. Some of his remarks were ill-advised, and offended many of the people standing by.

### Deplorable Scuffles

Immediately after Mrs. Hill's speech, the majority of our women dispersed, as they had been requested to do, and only a few of the organisers remained to clear up and attend to the removal of the posters, etc. It was then that most deplorable scuffles took place between Whites and non-Whites, mostly as the result of unprovoked attacks by an unruly White element. As far as we can judge, the Pretoria students were not directly responsible for these attacks, although their action in the first place caused the trouble.

Black Sash women were not directly involved in any of the incidents, but one or two of them tried to protect individual non-Whites against assault by the Whites, and they had to endure a good deal of obscene abuse from the White hooligans. Mr. Erasmus denied it in Parliament, but the police refused to take concerted action to disperse the crowd, and except for the extremely courageous single-handed action of one police constable and two traffic officers, they did nothing to prevent the assaults on the Africans. We understand the crowd was finally dispersed by traffic police.

Newspaper reports and articles have made it quite clear that the Black Sash organisers did all in their power to stage an orderly and peaceful demonstration ("and they had every right to protest," says one report) and the responsibility for the deplorable disturbances is placed firmly where it belongs—on the shoulders of the Pretoria intruders, in the first place, and of the White hooligans in the second.

## SASH TO CONTINUE

**T**HE Black Sash issued the following statement on the withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth:

The Black Sash regrets that South Africa's morally indefensible policy of apartheid has led to the Union's withdrawal from the Commonwealth.

In or out of the Commonwealth, the Black Sash will continue to work for the removal of racial discrimination.

In our view, apartheid and domination of any one group by another will lead to isolation and internal unrest.

Whether or not the internal policy of one country in the Commonwealth should be the concern of others, it is quite obvious that the Western world as well as the Afro-Asian bloc is against the policy of apartheid and racial discrimination.

Every White person in this country, regardless of party affiliations, should not be content merely to blame the Government but all should now ask themselves how far they are responsible for the unfair racial discrimination that is practised in our country.

## A LETTER FROM AUSTRALIA

**From Mrs. Jessie Groom, Mayoress of Brisbane, Australia.**

**L**AST week in Brisbane the march of protest arranged by you appeared on television. It was an inspiration to the women of Brisbane. Our thoughts and good wishes are with you particularly just now as you try to cope with this new development with regard to South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth.

Please rest assured that many of us feel closer to those of you who are waging this strong fight for justice than ever before. We know that eventually you will succeed as movements such as yours have succeeded in the past . . .

At many of the meetings of our women's organisations whose objective is to encourage women to take an intelligent responsibility for their community, your organisation is held up as an inspiration and example of what women *can* do . . .

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National hatred is something peculiar. You will always find it strongest and most violent where there is the lowest degree of culture.—*Goethe*.