

Nkwinti: The man they jailed for peace

JUST eleven short months ago the black township in the sleepy coastal hamlet of Port Alfred was acclaimed as a model of community organisation.

The tranquil 4000-strong white community - 90% of them are retired people - lifted their eyes in surprise to the hill on the eastern bank of the Kowie River when the impoverished black community there organised to fight for the upgrading of basic services and a better quality of life. The people used boycotts - school boycotts, consumer boycotts and work stayaways - as a strategy to pressure the white community into negotiating with them, and before the second State of Emergency the innovative approaches which blacks and whites in Port Alfred were hammering out together were receiving accolades from all around the country.

But the declaration of the State of Emergency has changed all that.

Now, a police cossack stands guard near the township entrance like a massive, permanent warning finger. Army troops patrol the streets. State-trained black municipal guards - "vigilantes in uniform" as they have been dubbed - aid their work, ensuring that township residents observe the late-night curfew. Large numbers of people have been detained while most of the leaders lucky enough to have evaded the dragnet of the security forces are in hiding. And the militancy of the youth now flares unchecked in spasmodic angry outbursts against the intransigence of a state determined to preserve white power and privilege.

Perhaps the detention of township leader Gugile Nkwinti, however, best sums up the cruel irony of the situation - that the alternative posed by this community and others like it was misperceived as a "threat to Law and Order" by the state, warranting a massive offensive in an attempt to crush the democratic movement and wipe out its legal space. A striking figure, handsome and articulate, 37-year-old Gugile worked as a senior psychiatric nurse at the Port Alfred Hospital before registering for a law degree at Rhodes University in 1986. But until Gugile's detention in January this year it was for his fight for the development of a non-racial, democratic movement against the apartheid system that he was widely acknowledged.

"The key is forming organisation", he told an interviewer in 1986. "An organisation is good when you bring it to the ground, when it works when you are not there. If I have succeeded in doing anything, it was because they (the community) were behind my back, pushing."

The first organisation formed in the 10 000 strong black community was the Nonzamo Student Guardian Association (NOSGA), which began in 1983 to address specific problems at the local high school. Gugile was elected as chairperson. Deft negotiations with education officials about an unsatisfactory school principal met with success when pupils' demands were met and a school boycott called off. NOSGA arranged for administration of the school to pass to a parent/teacher/student association, and the organisation continued to push the state to provide better school facilities.

Gugile's wife, Koleka, says that NOSGA was "the mother body which taught people how to organize". Indeed, a number of organisations were to grow up in NOSGA's wake. The Nkwintis, a strong team, began operating an informal township information centre out of their

home, to provide advice on pensions, unemployment payments and pass law problems, which subsequently became officially ensconced in a separate building.

In 1984 a separate organisation branched off from the information centre to deal specifically with pension problems. The Port Alfred Pensioners Organisation informed pensioners of the exact amounts they should be getting, so that "they now know what to expect and they can fight on their own" as Koleka said. The Port Alfred Worker's Association was the next to form, as an affiliate of SAAWU (the South

African Allied Workers Union, which is now a COSATU affiliate), to help workers demand their rights. The Port Alfred Youth Congress (PAYCO) began in 1985, and in 1986 the Port Alfred Women's Organisation (PAWO) was founded.

Representatives from most of these organisations sat on a central committee of the Port Alfred Residents Civic Organisation. The civic made decisions on various issues confronting the community as a whole, staying in close contact with the residents through street and area committees. The group also ran a creche and a pre-primary school.



It was within this organisational context that boycotts were explored as a strategy to bring state authorities and white businessmen to the negotiating table. After the success of the 1984 school boycott, the youth in the community called for a boycott of the township's beerhall, after it was bought by a partnership which included a former policeman. The community felt that the beerhall complex could be better used as a creche and handicraft centre. The beerhall owners asked Gugile to help them arrange negotiations. A meeting was held, but before the issue could be resolved, Gugile was arrested. However, the charge of "intimidation" was withdrawn after one of the beerhall owners confirmed that Gugile had in fact been constructively attempting to defuse the situation.

Nkwinti was imprisoned again in June 1985 for launching a project aimed at unifying the community. The old cemetery on the edge of the township had become a dumping ground for rubbish, and the idea was to get the people together to clean it. "There must be a value orientation. You must find the thin thread which will link everyone, something which will hold them together for a long time. And it must be a positive thing. This was the cemetery", Gugile said. Police, thinking that the gathering was some sort of meeting, dispersed the crowd with teargas and rubber bullets, and Gugile was detained for 14 days.

Yet the project succeeded in pulling people together. The community decided to erect a single tombstone for everyone buried there. They collected more than R1200 to buy a monument and persuaded the Administration Board to erect a fence around the cemetery to keep the area clean and well-groomed. Gugile described the day of the unveiling thus: "There was a huge church service in the stadium that day. Everyone came back for that, even from Johannesburg. People would say, 'so-and-so never came back home since he left for the mines years ago, and he came back for the tombstone.'"

The cemetery clean-up was intended to be a positive, constructive project, but Gugile's detention touched off the worst unrest in the history of Port Alfred. A two-week consumer boycott was called, and according to Koleka, "the youth were angry and there was fire, fire, fire in the streets of the township". But, true to character, as soon as Gugile was released he became involved in efforts to negotiate a peace.

This - fragile though it proved to be - was achieved through the establishment of a negotiating committee of which Gugile was chair. The white community, feeling the pinch from the loss of black spending power, were keen to set up a joint white business and municipal negotiating group called the Employer's Federation, which set about discussing the township's grievances along with the Port Alfred Chamber of Commerce.

The list of grievances was a long one, including demands for a new school; the withdrawal of security forces from the township; the release of several youths from detention; the abolition of segregated entrances into white shops; a single, non-racial municipality; a rent ceiling for pensioners; and a programme of job creation. The whites agreed to most of these demands. The Black Civic Group took their response to a community meeting attended by more than half the township residents, and the boycott was ceremoniously called off.

This negotiation process had far-reaching results. The racially-segregated shop entrances disappeared immediately, and a new school was completed. Behind-the-

scenes discussions resulted in the withdrawal of the police and army, and detainees were released on bail. There were reports of improved employer-employee relationships, and agreements on many other matters began to move forward. The Black Civic Group, the Employer's Federation and the Chamber of Commerce continued to meet regularly to discuss various projects.

But perhaps the most amazing outcome of the situation, in South African terms, was the effort to establish a single non-racial local authority for Port Alfred, to replace the standard separate administrative bodies for black areas and white areas. The Black Civic's proposal reiterated what democrats all over South Africa had been maintaining for so long: "We are convinced that if we work together (people of all races), South Africa would have no peer as a place in which to live". It was a reasonable proposal, suggesting for example that the money budgeted for the defunct community council be allocated to projects such as improved roads and lighting. The white town council decided to petition the government for permission to establish a single governing body for the whole of Port Alfred, and they were still awaiting a reply when the first State of Emergency was declared.

It was also at this time that Gugile was asked by two school principals to end a school boycott. He agreed to address the pupils, who in turn returned to school. But the students soon resumed their boycott when, the day after the Emergency regulations were promulgated (July 22, 1985), Gugile was detained.

What followed was to be the beginning of a terrible cycle of harassment, threats and the ordeal of detention for both Gugile and Koleka; a period which in fact continues up to the present day.

Nkwinti was held for six days, only to be re-detained on September 19 for another six weeks. Despite the major role he had recently played in ending the previous boycott, police insisted that he was the "instigator" of a new boycott call and it took a court order to release him. Next, PAWO called for a stayaway by the women of the township, most of whom work as domestic workers. This was a protest against the failure of the police to bring to justice a suspected informer who had been identified as the rapist of an elderly township resident. Although the stayaway was called off when the white women of Port Alfred met with a PAWO delegation to discuss the women's grievances, police immediately detained Gugile and this time Koleka as well.

Another consumer boycott was called in protest against their detentions. In the months that followed their release, the Nkwinti's dogs were shot, their home broken into and set alight, and telephonic threats made against their lives. The couple decided to go into hiding, to stay separately and to move around frequently to avoid detection. This was to be their lifestyle for eleven traumatic months. Yet even then Gugile continued to take forward his responsibilities to the community he cares about so intensely. When he was detained in January 1986 he was involved in sensitive back-to-school negotiations in his capacity as UDF East Cape zone organiser.

State action continues to plague the Nkwintis. When the State declared its third State of Emergency, Koleka was detained in Grahamstown on her way to visit Gugile. At the time of writing, both Gugile and Koleka are in detention.

Continued overleaf

Today, the atmosphere in the township is still tense. Municipal police occupy the former information centre and creche and surround it with tents for an around-the-clock police presence. The Nkwinti's home stands bare and fire-blackened.

While it seems a tragic waste that the community's primary peacemaker is punished for the community's efforts to better their conditions, Gugile himself remains

unbowed. During the first State of Emergency he said: "... (it) has disrupted our democratic organisations. But it is not easy for anyone to kill the structures of Port Alfred. People have tasted some kind of freedom. The organisations are there; the State of Emergency will do nothing...Jail makes people come out more confident. We are very grateful to the state for this. Many activists from other areas will learn from Port Alfred; they will exchange knowledge while they are in jail. It cannot be killed".

Regional Focus

Universities under attack

Lecturer expelled from South Africa

A SOCIOLOGY lecturer expelled from South Africa has called on universities to unite against any moves by the government to restrict the autonomy of tertiary education institutions.

Rhodes University lecturer, Mr Kirk Helliker, a Canadian citizen, was given two months to leave the country after his residence and work permits were not renewed.

The Minister of Home Affairs, Stoffel Botha, refused to allow Mr Helliker an appeal against his expulsion and also refused to disclose the reasons for his de facto deportation.

Mr Helliker's expulsion was the latest in a series of actions by the South African State against universities, teachers, academics and students critical of the apartheid system.

Four "white" universities had previously been invaded by police after students gathered on university property to protest against the white General Elections held in May.

A number of students and academics were detained under emergency regulations during peaceful protests at the Universities of Cape Town, Wits, Rhodes and Natal.

Shortly after being re-elected as State President, Pieter W. Botha announced that his government would "look very closely at the english-speaking campuses and would not allow them to become breeding grounds for radicals".

Educationists involved in the struggle for an end to apartheid have been hard hit by the State's attempt to crush the extra-parliamentary opposition movement.

Of the teachers employed by the Department of Education and Training (the department concerned with black education), 147 were unable to perform their duties over the last 12 months, because they were in detention.

In Mr Helliker's case the State chose not to renew his permits, thereby forcing him to leave the country without officially deporting him.

Shortly before he left South Africa for Zimbabwe, he said his lawyers had been told that the Department of Home Affairs had received a report about him from the Grahamstown Security Police and as a result the Minister had decided to force him to leave the country without granting him an opportunity to appeal.

"I am greatly disturbed about this fact, as I am sure

that the report consists mainly of misinformation and exaggerations about myself and I will not have the opportunity to prove this in court," he said.

Mr Helliker said that following the elections in which Botha's National Party received a mandate from the white electorate to continue along its chosen path, the government would possibly encroach on the already limited autonomy of the universities.

"In cases of foreign academics this will mean being thrown out of the country while in other cases it will mean detentions, bannings and other forms of harassment," he said.

Kei PAC trial continues

THE trial of six men and a woman charged with furthering the aims of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) is still continuing in the Transkei.

The seven accused, Leo Rubusana Kantolo, Villiers Simuku, Siggibo Mpendulo, Synod Madlebe, Nomthandazo Lusizi, Vivian Swartbooi and Victor Zamela, are facing nine counts related to furthering the aims of the banned PAC, recruiting people and harbouring three men known to the State as terrorists.

All seven have pleaded not guilty to all charges.

When the trial resumed last week, the first state witness, a Transkei articulated clerk, Mongameli Ngxokwana, was sentenced to a year's imprisonment for refusing to testify against the accused.

Ngxokwana, who was called as a state witness and also warned as an accomplice, refused to take the oath and indicated that he was not prepared to give evidence against the accused as he regarded himself as "one of them".

After being warned by the magistrate, Mr R. Micklesfield, and having the law he was contravening read out to him, Ngxokwana still refused to give evidence, saying that should he do so, it would "haunt his conscience for the rest of his life".

Magistrate Micklesfield said he did not accept Ngxokwana's reasons.

At this week's hearing, second state witness, Nzwamadoda Ntuli, was declared hostile, and arrested outside the courtroom hours after giving evidence.

When called to give evidence, Ntuli declined to take the oath, and asked the court to allow him to take legal advice to "straighten out certain things".

Micklesfield turned down this request.

Later, Ntuli did take the oath, but midway through his evidence, the prosecutor, D. Sankey, ordered that he be declared a hostile witness.