

ANOTHER PROFESSION UNDER FIRE FROM THE GOVERNMENT

NURSES FACE APARTHEID

by "SISTER X"

The last session of Parliament brought many new vicious and discriminatory laws. And among them — the Nursing Act, 1957. With this piece of legislation the Nationalists have launched their attack on the professions.

It is disgusting that a humanitarian profession such as nursing has become the target of their political attack. A nurse's work is arduous; her hours are long — sometimes 24 hours a day — but she must remain at her post, ministering to the sick, comforting the dying, assisting in the birth of humanity.

All the nurses of South Africa, black and white, have belonged to one association, and since 1944 have met together to discuss their mutual problems and to further their knowledge and skill through lectures and discussions.

Nursing is one of the few professions open to young African women. With much sacrifice and effort some have entered the medical and teaching professions. But because nursing does not require the financial burden of university fees, and because the learner nurse earns while learning, it has been possible for many young African women to become nurses.

In 1942 the nurses moved to form a trade union, because student nurses had no organisation, being excluded from membership of the S.A. Trained Nurses Association.

To dispel what they considered to be the "threat" of Trade Unionism among the nurses, a nation-wide campaign organised by leading nurses took place, which resulted in the 1944 Nursing Act.

This Act made provision for (1) A Nursing Council which was empowered to keep a register of all nurses and midwives, both trained and in training, to set the syllabus for the exams, to issue certificates, approve

of training schools prescribe uniforms and insignia, and exercise disciplinary measures over nurses and midwives to a limited extent. (2) A Nursing Association, membership of which was compulsory, and whose objects were to raise the status, maintain the integrity and promote the interests of the Nursing Profession.

This Nursing Act of 1944 had no discriminatory clauses, for:

- * there was one register for all nurses, irrespective of race;
- * all nurses had the right to vote for or be elected to the Nursing Council or Association Board or Branch Committees;
- * the syllabus, examinations, uniforms and insignia were the same for all nurses regardless of race.

Despite this, there was, needless to say, a certain amount of racial discrimination, in tune with the rest of racial discrimination in South Africa. For example, (1) all Non-European nurses are paid only three-fifths of the salary of White nurses; (2) For Europeans there is one holiday homestead and there are four homes for aged and incapacitated nurses (run by the Nurses Trust Fund), while there are no homes for Non-European nurses, although all nurses, irrespective of race, support the Nurses Trust Fund which is controlled by the Nursing Association; (3) Assistance given to Non-European nurses is lower than that given to Europeans, as for example in the case of a Non-European sister who was unable to work for a year because of T.B., and who was assisted by the Association to the extent of £4 a month — obviously inadequate; (4) Europeans have more access to and better training facilities for post-graduate courses than their Non-European colleagues.

In 1948 the S.A. Nursing Council requested an amendment to the 1944 Act, and the Minister took the opportunity of adding his own amendment, which was welcomed by the Council: —“that membership of the Nursing Council and the Board of the S.A. Nursing Association be restricted to persons of European descent.”

A badly-conducted so-called referendum took place in which only 28% of the nurses voted, with a 15% majority in favour of apartheid. Nurses of all races in both the Witwatersrand and the Cape strongly opposed this move, and in April 1957 when the second draft Bill was introduced by the Minister, resolutions of protest were passed by many branches of the S.A. Nursing Association, including Durban, Witwatersrand, Cape Western, East London and Port Elizabeth. These branch meetings, except for the Wits branch, were attended by a predominantly white membership.

During this period, the nurses were becoming increasingly aware of what the Nationalists intended to do, and a multi-racial vigilance committee was established in Cape Town. Shortly after this an action committee of all races was elected on the Witwatersrand. Four demonstrations of protest took place — in Durban, Cape Town, and two in Johannesburg, and these demonstrations were held despite specific instructions that provincial employees were debarred from taking part in such demonstrations. The nurses were NOT to be intimidated. They were well aware of the implica-

tions of the new Act, and they were alive to the link-up with the insulting Bantu Education Act.

The Nursing Act of 1957 introduces racial discrimination into the profession. It provides that:—

(1) No Non-White person may vote for or be elected to the Nursing Council or Board of the Association.

(2) Separate branches of the Association must be established for the different racial groups, i.e., for Europeans, Africans, Coloureds and Indians.

(3) Membership to the Association is compulsory.

(4) The decision of the European branch shall be the decision of the Association.

(5) The Council may prescribe different syllabus, uniforms and insignia in respect of white or coloured persons or Africans.

(6) The Council shall keep a separate register for white, coloured and African nurses.

(7) That race particulars are to be sent to the Council within a year of notification from the Council. Failing this, the nurse's name will be removed from the register, thus making it illegal for her to practise.

(8) An Advisory Board shall be established for Africans and Coloureds.

(9) It is a criminal offence with a maximum fine of £200 for a Non-White nurse to be employed in a supervisory position over a white nurse.

(10) The Council is empowered, under the heading of discipline, to inquire into any complaint or allegation against a nurse "whether or not in regard to such a person's profession or calling." Not only will unethical behaviour be punishable now, but the nurse's private life will be open to interference by the Council, particularly if her political views don't happen to coincide with theirs.

Thus we see how the new Act humiliates the Non-European nurses and robs them of every right that they have hitherto enjoyed, ably assisted by the Nursing Council which was established (inter alia) to maintain nursing standards, and the Nurses' Association, which was formed to serve the nurse's interests.

The Industrial Conciliation Act, which divides Trade Unions on racial grounds, provides for autonomy within the Non-European Trade Unions, but the Nursing Act has gone even further and given the Non-European nurses no voice whatsoever in their affairs.

The nurses' reply to this Act has been — we don't want apartheid! Throughout the Union the Non-European nurses have refused to form their apartheid branches. They no longer attend the Branch meetings together with the Europeans because the Association has stopped this, despite the

fact that it is no offense under the Act for nurses of all races to attend a meeting together.

The nurses are on the march. A national conference of nurses has been called by a Non-European nurses committee, to be held in Johannesburg on the 2nd and 3rd of November, to discuss the implications of this Act. (In the meanwhile, every effort is being made on the part of the enlightened European and Non-European nurses to maintain contact.)

An important item on the agenda of this conference is the possibility of the formation of a non-discriminatory nurses organisation, which will seek direct affiliation to the International Council of Nurses. The Nursing Association fears a complete separation such as this, for it will lose its affiliation to the I.C.N., which requires affiliated bodies to be governed by their own members. Already requests have been made by overseas nursing organisations from countries such as Holland and Jamaica that South Africa be disaffiliated when the Act was passed.

To maintain racial contact prior to the formation of a democratic association a Rand Nurses Professional Club has been established by Witwatersrand nurses, where nurses will meet together to maintain the status of nursing in South Africa; to hold regular professional meetings and keep its members informed of recent developments in the theory and practice of nursing; and to further the interests of nurses, and fight for the improvement of nursing in South Africa.

The nurses are determined to see that nursing — and as a result, medical services for Non-Europeans in South Africa — do not deteriorate because of the Act. To introduce an inferior training for Non-White nurses, for instance, would now be quite simple, and in line with Nationalist policy and Bantu Education. The result would be disastrous, not simply for the Non-White nursing services. The nursing and medical professions are ones in which the basic wrongness and stupidity of apartheid are most apparent. A broken leg, T.B., measles or cancer are the same for any race, in any language! The medical treatment and the nursing that a sick person gets must always be based on the highest possible standards according to the latest knowledge. Any deviation from this will drag down all medical and nursing services, for all races. There cannot be two standards, either in theory or in practice.

The conference that the nurses are to hold must show the government and all the world that the nurses of South Africa are prepared to safeguard their own rights and the good of their profession.

Once more, through their reactionary legislation, the Nationalists have aroused the anger and hate of yet another section of the people. The nurses were for long a group without any political direction. Now they too are taking their place in the struggle to achieve a democratic South Africa.