

25 YEARS AGO — on the 9th August 1956, in a massive display of non-racial solidarity, 20 000 women marched on the Union buildings in Pretoria against the extension of passes to African women.

The women of South Africa were expressing their resistance to all of the measures that increased their oppression and their exploitation.

Influx control and the migrant labour system, of which it is an important part, are for women the most hated aspects of apartheid.

Passes restrict and control the movements of their men. Having a pass — or not having one — stops people from getting proper jobs and housing.

The marching women had seen how migrant labour meant they were forced to spend their lives in distant poverty-stricken "homelands" whilst their men were forced to work in far-off cities for meagre wages.

When women were to be subjected to the same system as the men, it was obvious that they had to resist.

Throughout South Africa, the women led by leaders like Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Ray Alexander, Rahima Moosa, Elizabeth Mafekeng, Francis Baard and Florence Mkhize took part in the anti-pass campaign.

In the most remote rural areas all over South Africa women burned their passes. They risked jail, heavy fines, and the loss of their jobs rather than submit to the will of the government.

After a massive campaign the march by 20 000 women to Pretoria in 1956 was the climax.

The women's anti-pass campaign took place during one of the most important decades of defiance in the history of South Africa. In the '50's the Congress Alliance emerged as a powerful force and it actively supported the defiance of the women that was organised by the Federation of South African Women.

The women saw themselves as an integral part of any struggle for democracy and justice in South Africa. A year earlier when the anti-pass campaign was beginning to gain momentum, they — together with thousands of other South African democrats — put forward their demands to the Congress of the People for inclusion in the Freedom Charter.

The women demanded that they be granted the right to participate fully in government; that they should have proper housing at a cost which they could afford; that they should be allowed to live and work where they wished; that there should be free universal education for all children; that there should be proper social services and security for all people including pensions, maternity benefits, health and child-care facilities.

In formulating these basic rights the women were speaking as workers, mothers, and as members of oppressed communities.

The demands that they put forward were an expression of the problems that they faced in these situations.

The nation-wide resistance to passes for women was eventually crushed by heavy-handed repression, and the banning of the ANC in 1960 meant that for many years the demands of the people that had been made in the Freedom Charter were not heard.

By this year, the 25th anniversary of the march to Pretoria, the demands that the women made in 1955 and 1956 have not yet been met.

On the contrary, the situation has deteriorated. The extension of passes to women has meant that for many there is no chance of being able to find work where they can

## On August 9, 1956 20 000 women marched to the offices of the Prime Minister

# Knock Knock Knock

## We're still in union at the door

earn enough money to support their families.

This is especially so for the women who are shut up in the rural ghettos of the so-called "homelands". Here they are forced to endure sickness, poverty, and unemployment.

For those who decide to take the chance and move "illegally" to the towns they face a life of constant insecurity as members of one or other squatter community.

The only work available for the women locked up in poverty-stricken homelands by the pass-law system is farm labour, and for the 'illegals' in towns, domestic menial tasks which pay notoriously low wages.

The housing crisis which outraged women in the 50's exists today in a far worse form. The ghettos of urban South Africa are filled far beyond overflowing. The government has not built houses — instead it has demanded that more and more people 'resettle themselves' in the homelands. When people refuse to move voluntarily the system hunts them down and forcefully removes them. It is also harder for women who are not married, and who are the sole supporters of their families, to be able to find proper accommodation.

The education system — at the time of FSAW'S emergence as target of the people's anger because of the introduction of Bantu Education to the schools — is still being actively resisted by students all over the country. In this they have the support of their parents.

The meagre wages that people earn have hardly improved at all. If anything the spiralling inflation rate has made it harder now for families to make ends meet. The dramatic increase in unemployment means that less money has to provide for more people. For women — who bear the ultimate responsibility of stretching their money to buy food and clothes — life has become a constant battle for survival.

Despite the increase in suffering



A massive display of non-racial solidarity — 20 000 women at the Union Buildings

and exploitation they have been forced to endure, the battle against the system has never stopped. In recent years, with the renewed intensification of resistance to oppression, women have once again been in the forefront.

As workers, women have stood up to strike when their democratic demands for recognition of their unions and for living wages have not been met. Women were in the frontline during the Sea Harvest strike in Cape Town, and during last

year's Frame strike in Durban.

The success of consumer boycotts in recent years is to a large extent due to the solidarity shown by women. Because it is they who are responsible for the household and the buying of food, it was they who carried out the common decisions not to buy Fattis and Monis products, and not to buy red meat.

Women have resisted the attempts to force them to live in the homelands where there is no future, and where life is a constant battle

for food, for money, for wood, for water . . .

In Modderdam, Crossroads, and now from the Langa barracks women have shown clearly that pass laws or not, they will continue to resist being shut into the homelands where all that is to be found is starvation. Women have said before — and will say again — rather the jails and fines than the bantustans.

Women have also stood up in



Armed with thousands of petitions the leaders of the Federation of South African Women



Women stand knocking at the office door of the then Prime Minister J. G. Strydom. Initially they were denied access to his office because 'there were members from all racial groups'.

## and we're not going away until . . .



home' and to allow for the full participation of women in the struggle for a more just and democratic future.

The struggle of the women of South Africa is not unique. It is similar to the struggles that have been fought by women elsewhere. In countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia there has been the important recognition that women must organise, not to fight against men,

but to fight with men in a common battle for a better future.

At the same time, there has been the realisation that part of this struggle is to convince both men and women that age-old ideas about the subservience and inferiority of women must be eradicated. Such myths, can only work against the common struggle of the oppressed people.

Today, women are taking up this challenge with renewed vigour and determination. They know well that "That's why it's really necessary that we throw out forever the idea that the woman should stay here and not get involved in unions or political matters because even if she's only at home she's part of the whole system of oppression".

In celebrating August 9th as National Women's Day — in recalling one of the most inspiring events in the history of the people's struggle in South Africa, we are recognising the importance of the contribution that women have for the struggle.

of their communities to resist attempts to force upon them increases, to make them ac-housing that is not fit for hu-habitation, that does not even the most basic amenities.

Durban, the women of Newlands East and many townships united on a mass to resist increased rents. In the rejection of higher rents Community Councils were that were taken up under the leadership of the Women's Federa-

tion. In the Cape women were prominent in the Parent-Student Committees formed during the school boycotts, and have taken up the challenge to fight for their communities under the banner of the United Women's Organisation.

The reason that women have played such an active part in recent resistance, is a simple one. For them, all of these issues are immediate and they are urgent. As in many other countries, one of the major responsibilities of women is

caring for children and the home. This extra job is theirs even if they spend an 8 or 10 hour day slaving in factory and field.

When children are threatened by teargas and police batons, when skyrocketing rents mean that families face eviction, it is natural that women should come forward to participate in the struggle for justice and a fairer distribution of the country's resources.

However, this is not always the case. Years of being shut in the

home have made many women believe that it is not for them to take action — that they should rather wait for their husbands and children to lead the way. Today there are women who are still reluctant to come forward.

This is why it is so important that there is happening the small beginnings of the re-emergence of women's movements in South Africa. It is only in unity with other women that it is possible to fight the myth that 'a women's place is in the

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