

WORKING AT THE OUTPOSTS

The Eastern Cape is the furnace of South African politics. These extracts, compiled by Lindy Harris, give us a sense of what this means for Black Sash work in

the border region



Nora Squires demonstrates her willingness to take up yet another burden.

Linda Berkowitz, Border Region fieldworker.



The Border Region of the Black Sash has grown tremendously over the past year. From a small group of concerned women, meeting once a month, we have now expanded our activities to include a very busy advice office. We also have a full-time fieldworker, Linda Berkowitz, who has proved invaluable. However, there is still far too much to do. At our monthly meetings, there never seems enough time to discuss all the issues at hand. Although attendance has grown, there are still nowhere near enough members to deal with all the work, and our members tend to be very thinly stretched.

The needs in our area are vast: resettlement problems, repression and extreme poverty mean there is no shortage of work. This has its positive side as everyone can gain experience and skills in a wide range of areas. We are now beginning to form a few sub-committees, and hope in this way to draw additional people into the Black Sash.

The Border area has a long and proud history of resistance. Black people here are militant, principled and uncompromising, with incredible courage and ability to

bear huge hardships. It is not always easy to build trust, but we feel that we are making some progress. We are lucky that the Black Sash has built up a reputation of trustworthiness nationally, and we are able to draw on that reputation. We are also learning that missionary fervour is not enough, and that we have to take the history, principles and dynamics of existing organisations very seriously if we are not to be patronising.

There are hardly any progressive organisations in the Border area in which whites can easily get involved. This has meant that our small group is very visible, and sometimes vulnerable to things like nasty phone calls and letters, and the slashing of car tyres.

As an illustration of some of our work, we include descriptions of some incidents by some of our members. First, *Nora Squires* describes what happened one day when she went to assist pensioners at Kwelerha:

Pension payout day in Jongilanga, Kwelerha, in May. Not an engagement that filled me with joy. I had had several brushes in the past with

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the paymaster as well as the soldier guards who accompany the pay-out combi. This occasion was to be no different. The pensioners were receiving their back pay, ie the difference in the pension rate between South Africa and Ciskei. The pensioners had been paid at the Ciskei rate when the administration of the area was illegally taken over by Ciskei in 1981. Administration reverted to South Africa in 1985 and those pensioners who qualified were owed quite large sums of money.

To ensure that the pensioners, most of whom are illiterate, received the amount indicated on their pay-out card, we devised a system whereby the pensioner would bring her/his card to us, and the amount on the card would be written in pencil in the back of their ID books. When they received their money they would return to us to have the amount checked against the entry. Amounts paid varied between R600 and R900, depending on the length of time that the person has been receiving a pension.

I started the usual procedure, taking the first pensioner's pay-out card, when I was stopped by a shout of rage from the pay-master in the combi. He would pay no pension, he said, unless I desisted from interfering in his work and handling government property. I was completely baffled, as to my knowledge I had not touched government property. The soldiers took their cue from the pay-master, rushed up to me and threatened to arrest me for touching government property. 'What government property?' I asked.

'The cards, the cards!' came the reply. I promised faithfully to desist from handling government property and the pensioners were quick to take their cue. They would come to us holding the 'government property' aloft like a banner, and we would only handle private property, their ID books. Pension monitors beware, you might be handling government property unwittingly, and ignorance is no defence!

Zola Nozewu's funeral

The plight of the people of Potsdam in the Ciskei is one that has moved us greatly. In February this year, they fled from their homes in the face of ongoing assaults and harassment by the Ciskei police. About 2 500 people squatted at a roadside on the South African side of the border, pleading with the South African authorities to be given a place to stay in South Africa. Instead, they were forcibly trucked back into the Ciskei, to face even worse harassment. Most recently, a community leader, Zola Nozewu, was murdered by the vigilantes. Nora Squires and Sue Power describe what happened at his funeral, which they attended:

Sunday 9 August was the date set for the funeral of Zola Nozewu, a leader from the Potsdam community. We had got to know and respect him during the period when the community camped alongside a South African road, after their unsuccessful attempt to escape from Ciskei.

Nozewu had been the victim of endless harassment from police and vigilantes since his return to Potsdam, culminating in his murder by a vigilante in July.

His mother was terrified that there would be trouble at the funeral and her fears proved to be tragically correct.

Four Black Sash members from East London attended the funeral. We were stopped twice on the road leading to Potsdam by police road-blocks. On the first occasion we were questioned and the car was searched. We told them where we were going and they allowed us to proceed.

About 100 yards from the funeral service we were stopped again by a casspir and several police cars. This time they gave us a thorough going over, to the extent of running their fingers through one of the men's hair. Sue's bag was searched, private letters, diary and purse were checked before they finally allowed us to join the service.

The people had been warned by the police that the service should be

non-political with no freedom songs, raised fists or toi-toi. A most restrained and dignified service was held at the home of Zola's mother, Nellie Nozewu. The burial ground was situated some 1.5 km away on the side of a steep hill running down to a river.

A hearse, followed by a combi carrying Zola's mother and other close relatives and friends, led the procession. The rest of the mourners followed on foot in a very orderly manner.

After we had walked about half the distance, a casspir, police van and several police cars approached from the left.

We were near the back of the procession and could not see what happened but suddenly crowds of people came rushing back towards us saying that the police had attacked the combi with tear gas and that as the terrified mourners tried to get out of the combi they were sjambokked and shots fired.

We continued walking forward and found the deserted combi and saw that people had run down into the valley to escape from the teargas, the smell of which was still heavy in the air.

The hearse now stood alone at the grave, with the police lined up on the road above.

A man in the crowd suggested that we should walk right up to the police and ask them if we might