

ecc: the art of bouncing back

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Twice in the last nine months, the End Conscription Campaign has faced Emergency restrictions that the government intended as the organisation's death warrant. On both occasions the press wrote the ECC's epitaph. No one expected an organisation to survive when its very name might be construed as a 'subversive statement'.

Yet the ECC not only survived, it sometimes even flourished under the greatest repression in its three-year history. During this time, we in the ECC have learnt a fundamental lesson: whether we continue to operate effectively depends as much on us as on the government. It depends on how well we adapt to the new situation and learn the lessons of the past year.

This article is an attempt to share our experiences, in the belief that they may be useful to others facing similar challenges.

For the first six months of 1986 the dramatic growth we had experienced since the army moved into the townships continued. Thousands of people participated in campaigns and new branches were formed in Afrikaans-speaking communities.

The ECC's national impact and the reported low morale in the army intensified the authorities' reaction. 'Troopies' were given anti-ECC lectures, senior South African Defence Force officers accused it of 'undermining the will of the young people to defend South Africa' and rightwing smear campaigns intensified. Yet as we approached mid-year our biggest complaint was that we were growing faster than we could cope with organisationally!

When the Emergency struck in June, it looked as if all this would be

thrown into reverse. The first two weeks were traumatic. About thirty of our members were jailed and our meetings were banned in the eastern and western Cape. It was now an offence to make 'subversive statements' that could 'incite the public to discredit or undermine' conscription.

Our immediate reaction was to stop all public work. Under attack, it was necessary for us to turn inwards. The repression was not simply intended to stop high-profile campaigning: it also aimed to disorganise us by intimidating our members. A key task was to hold the organisation together, nationally and at branch level, and to maintain a high level of morale. We had to create the space for members to talk about their feelings of fear and anger, and support each other.

It was equally important to improve our security arrangements so that we were less vulnerable to detentions and police surveillance. Some of our office-bearers went into hiding; we avoided discussing ECC over the telephone, and destroyed all notes after meetings. The real challenge was to do these things without falling into the trap of becoming an underground organisation. ECC has always been and will remain a legal organisation.

However, we did fall into the trap of giving security priority over democracy. Discussion and decision-making initially tended to be centralised in our executive rather than involving all our sub-committees and affiliates. When we corrected this problem we found that our democratic way of working took longer in the new situation but, if we were careful, was not



more risky or less efficient. On the contrary, it improved the quality of our decisions and helped build unity.

The detentions also exposed our dependence on a few people for leadership and direction. The break from campaign work allowed us to put more effort into organisational training, including workshops on public speaking, the production of media, chairing meetings and developing theoretical and analytical skills.

By September we had gathered our strength sufficiently to consider public action. Our lawyers advised us that, despite the Emergency regulations, there was still much we could do. We could campaign against the general militarisation of our society, the school cadet system, the presence of troops in the townships and the legislation around military service. We could continue to use our name and call for a just peace. (Although the restrictions were tightened in the December revision of the Emergency regulations, our legal position remained essentially the same.)

We knew that even if our campaigns were legal, they still carried the risk of further detentions. But we could not ban ourselves by remaining silent. We had to go out and campaign.

Our first national campaign under the Emergency was defensive, demanding the ECC's right to speak. The centrepiece of the campaign was a newspaper advertisement, signed by 150 leaders of both black and white communities, calling on the government to recognise freedom of conscience.

Subsequent campaigns became more adventurous. Yellow ribbons decked the streets of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. Thousands of pamphlets told white school pupils that 'apartheid is sending us to war'. At a public meeting, University of Cape Town lecturers declared their refusal to register for 'Dad's army'. ECC called on parents to buy Christmas toys for peace and not war. Children came together for a non-racial picnic at Archbishop Tutu's residence.

Through these campaigns, ECC regained the national presence it had enjoyed before June. Our mistake was to underestimate the seriousness of the Emergency. The national crackdown in December caught us off-guard. Executive members in Johannesburg were detained and others served with restriction orders. In Cape Town, nine activists involved in the 'War is no Solution' campaign were detained and later charged under the Emergency regulations.

So 1986 ended on a sober note. Yet, despite harassment, our organisation remained strong and committed.

Our first objective in 1987 is to continue to raise awareness of the effects of militarisation and to increase pressure on the government to recognise the internationally accepted right of freedom of conscience regarding military service. Secondly, we will continue putting effort into organ-

isational priorities such as cohesion and morale, democratic processes, tight security and training.

Our third objective is to develop lower-profile means of reaching people — housemeetings, letters to the press, building a mass membership and strengthening ECC as a coalition. Under the Emergency our member organisations, and the Black Sash in particular, provided invaluable support and often took forward ECC work when we were unable to do so. The long-term future of the campaign may depend on the

extent to which these organisations are able to take up the issues of militarisation independently of the ECC.

For as long as there is conscription into an army that defends apartheid, there will be a movement against conscription — no matter what the government has in store for us. By compelling white men to contain black dissent through the use of force, the government makes itself vulnerable to dissension in the white community and in its army. Harassing the ECC will not change this. □



sash women on trial

—
susie power

On 5, 6 and 7 May 1986 the Black Sash held a stand outside East London's City Hall to protest about the detention of Duncan Village leaders. Three members went each day: one stood, while the other two sat on a bus-stop bench about 12m away. There was contact between members only when the poster changed hands.

The police watched and took photos — as usual, when Border stands. On 7 May a photo was taken of four women at the bus-stop before the stand itself began. A fourth member had come along to

tell the others of the threatening calls she had received, namely, that if the Sash kept up the protest somebody would be severely injured. The four were not wearing sashes at the time but the wording on the poster, 'Talk to the leaders — don't jail them', was clearly visible.

The four were charged with contravening a section of the Internal Security Act prohibiting gatherings between April 1986 and March 1987. On 19 December they were found guilty and received suspended sentences. □