


**“ya, the community
is the main source, of
power . . .”
interviews**

To learn from comrades in the Eastern Cape about their experience of building people's power and controlling crime, ISIZWE conducted interviews. Here are the views of two comrades, the first from Uitenhage, and the second from Port Elizabeth.

Question: Comrade, please can you tell us how are area committees elected?

Answer: We start at the street level. People gather themselves from the street and hold a meeting where they will decide. They elect their committee of ten people. Above that street level, the two townships (Kwanobuhle and Langa) are zoned into five areas each. Each area committee has ten members elected from street committees. There is also a committee co-ordinating all ten areas.

But the apartheid system is trying very hard to demolish the area committees.

Question: They know all about it?

Answer: Yes.....they wanted to know and harass and detain people involved in area committees. They ask all about this thing, and they threatened people saying 'No this is indeed a communist orientation.

Question: What is the main role of the area committee?

Answer: It involves a political and social role in controlling and reducing crime. It's also where they discuss day-to-day problems of people. It's where even their organisations are able to get a mandate from the people - through the area committees.

Question: Area committees then go back to each street?

Answer: Yes. But they hold meetings under difficult conditions because the army and the hippos and casspirs are moving around trying to find out where the meetings are being held. That's a problem.

Question: You say area committees control crime. Can you give an example?

Answer: They are not trying to imitate the white courts, or trying to beat people No such thing. They are there to create peace among people. If there is something going to happen they call the people involved together and try to end it. The dangerous crime where people kill another

person, it's out of our hands.

Question: What cases are dealt with, then?

Answer: For instance a theft. If one steals a thing, if you can solve that, to have the thing returned back to the owner, you try. You talk to the one who steals. Also, even disputes of divorce. We try to involve relatives of both parties so that they can come together to find a solution. In cases of assault, we call those people involved, and try to talk them into paying medical fees for the assault. We tend to have success, and get a chance now to educate people about our cause.

Question: What do you say to such people?

Answer: We say that fighting each other, like doing harm to each other, the oppressed people, it doesn't help. The major thing people must concentrate on fighting the apartheid system. So people must give their attention straight to the oppressive system. Some people are individualistic. So we're trying hard with these people to show them the right way. And now, with these area committee structures the crime rate is down - very, very down.

Question: Was there a lot of crime before?

Answer: Before a lot.

Question: What sort of crimes before?

Answer: It was a lot of stabbing. Now there is much less. After a month of the area committees being formed, we got a report that there were two week-ends without any case of people being stabbed or assaulted.

It is true that the rate of alcohol is still very high. But we try even to organise the shebeeners. We have a specific time, at 9 o'clock they must be closed. They abide by that.

Question: Does the area committee operate like a court sometimes, or like a police force? Can you compare it with any of those?

Answer: You see, there are those called amabutho. They call themselves the police or army of the people. For instance, amabutho are the ones to avail themselves to patrol, when to check that the shebeeners are closed at 9 o'clock. That thing helped, because the owners of shebeens don't need to be told now. They know it is their responsibility to prevent crime from their place.

Question: If there are fights, do the amabutho go and check?

Answer: Yes.

Question: What do they do?

Answer: The only thing they do is separate the people. The kind of thing we emphasise to them is that we don't want people to be beaten up. But it has happened sometimes. For instance, I found one youth was being beaten up by the amabutho because he tried to enter the house of his girl friend. The girl's mother reported him to the amabutho, who gave him lashes. I personally went to the amabutho and told them, 'Look we must not do that. And how you do the same to the people, as the police do. The people will strike you off from the member-

ship of the organisations of the people. If people decide on that, you will be aware that you are not doing this violence as part and parcel of the organisation. You are doing violence without a mandate.

We are fighting for the liberation of our people. We must not ill-treat them. If we do something which is misconduct over them, they will run away from us. I told the amabutho this very important thing. We must get people to support us 100 percent. We don't need 99 percent. We want 100 percent. We must show the world the apartheid government stands alone.

Question: How is the amabutho composed? Is it youth?

Answer: Yes it is the youth. The amabutho are people who volunteer, as soldiers of the people, and you find they have a pride for that.

Question: Do you politicise the amabutho?

Answer: Yes, we have to tell them about the past of the struggle, the history. We teach them you can't achieve anything without discipline.

Generally, ya, I can say the community is the main source of power, because the state has really lost the control over the people. He has no power over the people in terms of controlling them. This is why the people have formed these area committees, so that they can try to control themselves. What has been preached in the past about the Freedom Charter, even now we are trying to do that practically.

Question: Do the people know the Freedom Charter quite well in the townships of Uitenhage?

Answer: They know the Freedom Charter, but especially the first clause, 'The People Shall Govern'.....

When ISIZWE spoke to comrades from Port Elizabeth townships, we found that there was a similar system of crime control in operation.

Question: To what extent are the SAP involved in controlling crime?

Answer: All crimes are taken initially to the area committees. People don't want to be seen to be collaborating or informing the police before the area committees have been informed. Each case is weighed. Hardened criminals who constantly attack and rob people will be sent to the police. Or at least, the offended party will be told to report it to the police if they want to. Minor cases are dealt with by the people involved themselves.

Question: Do people see a political dimension to this?

Answer: Yes. In most areas there is a great demand for membership cards of organisation. There is a great deal of confidence in the organisations. Since the release from detention of the leadership in September last year, there has been a general appreciation of the organisational control and direction of the situation, after the previous situation of chaos.

In some areas, 'Kangaroo courts' were formed while our leadership in PE were still in detention. These courts were organised on an ad hoc basis, they were

not organisationally controlled. They were not under the discipline of the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (PEBCO), or of the Youth Congress (PEYCO). They were formed by groups of individual amabutho. In some cases these courts did use violence, especially beatings, to punish people. This was changed after the leadership were released. These structures were replaced with more disciplined structures. Before this, the amabutho sometimes acted in their own interests, for instance fining people, but having no political direction. The UDF dissociated itself from these 'Kangaroo courts'.

Question: What are the problems still confronting area committees in the control of anti-social behaviour?

Answer: There is a process of trying to clarify what sort of cases the area committees should be involved in. They are reluctant to be involved in family disputes, for instance.

Another problem is that sometimes people are reluctant to go to their area committee, and only want to take their problems to the senior leadership in Port Elizabeth.

People who go straight to the leadership are referred back to the area committee in their own area. Another similar problem is that people who are unhappy with their own area committee's decision, will report it to another area, or invite the amabutho from another area to come and sort it out.

We have got the amabutho now to understand that they cannot go and take decisions or act in other areas. They are now careful not to be exploited in this way.