

Womens Stay-away in Port Alfred

The rape of an elderly woman sparked an all-women stay-away in the Eastern Cape seaside town of Port Alfred. It is believed to be the first stay-away of its kind in South Africa. Domestic workers and women employed on the municipality's job creation scheme embarked on a week-long stay-away in protest against the police's failure to arrest the rapist, who residents said was clearly identified by his victim.

But when police responded by detaining 14 community leaders, and white business leaders halted negotiations with community leaders, residents started boycotting shops again. It was a predictable escalation of events in a township where the see-saw of detention and boycott has become familiar. A member of the Port Alfred Womens Organisation (PAWO) said: "We tried to make Port Alfred normal again, but some people don't want it. Instead of helping us, they arrested us."

It all began on May Day, when a 58-year-old resident was taken from her home by a township resident, and taken to the stadium where she was raped and stabbed repeatedly. She was then left there by her assailant, and was only found the next morning by a young girl. The police and ambulance service were alerted, and in the meantime a large group of residents collected, including the alleged rapist. The woman pointed him out, and police took him away. His victim was taken to hospital.

Coincidentally on the same day, a group of young people singing in the street to mark May Day were dispersed by the police, and five young women arrested. They were detained under section 50 of the Internal Security Act, which provides for 14 days of preventive detention.

According to the police, the alleged rapist appeared in court the next day and was released "pending further investigations". The same evening his house was burned down. Residents of the township, which has no name, were incensed. Community members said the man had a history of assaults on women, including rape, but they believed he had been released because he was a friend of the police. Two days after the incident, a PAWO member said, he had been seen riding around in the police van reading a newspaper.

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It was decided to embark on the stay-away to put pressure on the police to take action against a man perceived to be a danger to women in the community. "We decided to stay away from work so that they can catch him," said the PAWO member. It was seen as unfair that a rapist was being allowed to go free, while five young students were being detained.

From Monday, May 5, Port Alfred was empty of women workers, while their menfolk were at their jobs as usual. Asked why men had not been called on for their support, the PAWO member said: "Why should we, he wasn't going to rape them, he was going to rape us."

The stay-away lasted until the end of the week, and on the following Monday some women started going back to work. By the next day, all women were back, except some domestics whose employers had fired them. However, on the same day the police stepped in and detained about 16 community leaders, including the chairperson of PAWO, Mrs Kolekha Nkwinti and her husband, prominent community leader Gugile Nkwinti.

The consumer boycott was soon in place, and seems to have prompted the early release of Gugile Nkwinti. He was freed some four days before his 14 days' spell of detention was due to end. It is not the first time he has been released early after a consumer boycott was launched. During an earlier spell of detention last year, massive pressure was brought to bear on local police by local business leaders, and this secured an early release.

The other 13 were freed on the day their 14 days ended, May 26. However, the consumer boycott has remained in place because of the breaking off of talks by businessmen, organised in the Port Alfred Employers' Federation.

People's power

Port Alfred's township is a highly organised community. Although the PAWO is a relatively new organisation, having been formed only about one and a half months ago, it joins a range of well-established bodies united in the Port Alfred Residents' Civic Organisation. The others include the Nonzamo Student Guardian Association; a parents' body; the Port Alfred Workers Union, affiliated to the South African Allied Workers Union; the Port Alfred Youth Congress and the Port Alfred Pensioners Association.

Coming into the township, one is struck by an impression of people's power at work. There is a cheerful roadblock at the entrance, kept by youths who interrupt their soccer game every now and again to check a car for goods bought in defiance of the boycott. Right at the entrance is the old East Cape development board building, part of which has been taken over by the community for a creche.

But community leaders rejected suggestions it was a liberated zone. "It can't be as long as the police still come in periodically to make arrests, said Mr Gugile Nkwinti, although police did not "camp" in the township like they did elsewhere. "We are partially in control of some aspects of our lives, we are effectively nullifying institutional control over us," he said.

One example of this was that the Nonzamo Student Guardian Association (Nonzamo is the name of the secondary school) had gained a direct say in the running of the schools, including the hiring and firing of teachers. As far as general administration of the township is concerned, the ECDB is practically defunct, and no rents are being paid.

The Civic Organisation consists of both the interest groups, such as the workers, pensioners and other bodies, and area and street committees. The base line is the street assembly, a meeting of all residents in a particular street. The executives of the four interest groups make up the Central Committee which meets once a month.

The Central Committee elects an Executive Committee, which meets weekly. Any proposal from one of the interest groups will be passed on to the area and street committees for discussion, who will pass back their feelings to the Executive Committee. It takes two weeks to take a decision: "What we are practising here is democracy," said Mr Nkwinti.

Examples of decisions taken were one that shebeens should close at 8 pm. Another important decision taken recently was on a code of punishments for people not prepared to adhere to decisions taken by the community organisations. These include cleaning the building, housing a creche and an advice office known as the "Information Centre", cleaning the old cemetery, a directive to come for political education and the most severe punishment, being isolated from the community. "We do not believe in Peoples' Courts in our situation. Our strength is in education", Mr Nkwinti said.

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Port Alfred Womens Organisation

The aims of PAWO are to fight for the rights of women in all spheres. Besides their campaign over the rape issue, the women have embarked on a programme of speaking to students in their schools about the importance of discipline. The drive has already borne fruits, residents said. Also, women have joined together to help people faced with a death in the family, either through police action or otherwise.

PAWO has not yet applied for membership of the umbrella civic, but this is seen as just a matter of time.

(Franz Kruger, May 1986)

Technical Change and Union Organisation The Closure of Epol in Cape Town*

At the end of October 1985, Epol closed its animal feeds factory in Maitland, Cape Town. Some three hundred workers were made redundant and the Food and Canning Workers Union lost one of its best organised factories.

Organising Epol in Cape Town began in 1982 when a number of African contract workers approached the union. By June of that year, over 70% of the workers voted to have the union represent them. The African contract workers remained the core, but support for the union was soon far more widespread as "Coloured" and white workers joined. In the plant, jobs were differentiated on racial lines with most Africans doing primarily unskilled manual work eg. bag handlers, most Coloured workers occupying semi-skilled positions eg. drivers, and whites performing skilled or supervisory work eg. mechanics. According to workers interviewed, management constantly

* This paper is based on interviews with management and technical personnel in a number of companies in the animal feeds industry, as well as union officials and workers in the Epol plant.