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WOMEN AGAINST PASS LAWS

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So Thursday, August 9th, 1956, blended into our history, will yet stand out as a rock, a monumental achievement by the most oppressed, suffering and downtrodden of our people — the women of South Africa.

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It started a year before, in August, 1955, when the women of the Transvaal, gathered in Conference organised by the Federation of South African Women, made a simple suggestion. "The Government ignores our pleas, our

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Then in October, 1955, the women of the Transvaal went to Pretoria — two thousand women of all races, to the very heart of Union Buildings, of the Government itself. To get there, they had to overcome innumerable obstacles; they had met with every possible official rebuff and refusal, with police interference and intimidation, withdrawal of transport and deception, to prevent them from going. They had overcome personal difficulties,

"I was there!" Twenty thousand women filled the Union Building Amphitheatre on August 9th, 1956. Here the women are still pouring in.

Photo: Pretoria News.

which are always so much greater for a woman than a man, and the result of their efforts was a demonstration that made headlines throughout South Africa, and was recorded and televised in other countries in the world. The dignity, discipline and quiet resolution and determination of the women impressed even those who did not understand the true meaning of their demonstration.

The protests grew. The next month, Cape Town women marched through the streets of their city, displaying their protests against passes and deportations; and before the end of 1955, the militant women of Durban were once again pounding on the door of the Native Administration Offices, declaring that they would not carry passes.

Early in 1956 the women of East London took up the cry against passes. "Oh, what a law! We are refusing totally!" said the memorandum they presented to the local Commissioner. A month later, Durban and Cape Town

were again protesting, while in March, 1956, the women of Germiston led off Transvaal demonstrations once more with three hundred women, who, undeterred by extraordinary police threats of mass arrests, shooting of leaders, and most severe forms of intimidation, marched to their local offices, declaring "Even if the passes are printed in real gold we do not want them."

THE DECISION

It was in March, too, that the Transvaal women, meeting in Conference, decided to go to Pretoria once again. Two thousand women and men attended that Conference, and with one voice resolved to fight passes to the bitter end.

Meanwhile, the issue of passes — "reference books" — to women had begun. In the Free State town of Winburg, numerous women were tricked into taking the new books; many

were brought in by their employers from outlying farms, ignorant of what was happening; many were persuaded that the books were not passes, but permits that would permit them to move freely anywhere.

Within a week, hundreds of Winburg women marched silently to the Magistrate's Court, and burned the new pass books, prepared to face the consequences of such an action.

The following month — April — the women of Klerksdorp organised a mass protest, four hundred of them, to the Native Commissioner. Blocked by the police, the women sat in the road and demanded that the Native Commissioner come to them. He came. "If you force us to take passes, we shall burn them!", the women said.

In May, women demonstrated in Brakpan and Bethlehem — twelve hundred in Brakpan, and four hundred in the little town of Bethlehem. June saw the women of Johannesburg organising once again — this time, a thousand women from the Western Areas, and a few

days later four hundred domestic servants from the suburbs of Johannesburg. Orlando women marched, and women from Alexandra Township, and on June 23rd, one thousand women of the South Western Areas added their protest march and demand that pass laws be abolished.

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So the demonstrations spread and grew. The Commissioners grumbled that all the women demonstrators said the same thing. In reply, they too, told the women the same story: that the reference books were for their own protection — not really passes at all. The women were not deceived.

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"STRIJDOM, YOU HAVE STRUCK A ROCK"

The night before the demonstration, women began assembling in Pretoria, and Lady Selborne location threw open its doors

to thousands. In the location Bantu Hall, and many other location halls, demonstrators came together in all-night "wakes" before The Day. Women's contingents had come from Bethlehem, Bloemfontein, Natal, Ermelo; from the Reef, from Kimberley, from Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Paarl, Stellenbosch, Worcester. Women gathered at "eve-of-protest" meetings along the Reef. Husbands took over indispensable household duties. Everything was keyed in readiness for the great day.

And finally, August 9th, 1956. While Premier Strijdom remained out of sight, twenty thousand women overflowed the amphitheatre of Union Buildings, rocking the Cabinet — and the country — to a realisation that AFRICAN WOMEN DO NOT WANT PASS BOOKS.

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And throughout the country, the echoes of that demonstration resounded. The conservative "white press" commented on the impressive, moving dignity and discipline of the women. "Those women assembled in Pretoria in their thousands", stated the Argus editorial comment, "are still only a small reflection of the deep resentment that this unnecessary legislation has aroused. To ignore them and what they represent deepens stupidity into monumental folly."

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"The women's campaign has been a model of patient and peaceful organisation," wrote New Age. "What more can they do than they have done to make clear to the authorities what they want — or rather what they don't want? . . . Does Strijdom think, because he turns a deaf ear, that they will tamely give

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And so Pretoria was not the end, but the beginning. Two days later, women at the second National Conference of the Federation of South African Women, resolved to take the struggle against pass laws to every woman throughout the land; to the isolated farms and country dorps; to villages and reserves; to obtain pledges of opposition to passes from women everywhere.

For the women well understand that this is a bitter struggle, demanding everything they can give. They know now that there is no refuge for them in their homes; they cannot provide for their children by keeping quiet or "leaving it to the men." Poverty, hardship, insufficient food and clothes, inadequate housing, they have always known. Now they know, as well, that the laws of the country invade what homes they have, walk right into their kitchens, pervert the minds of their children, tear families asunder, demand that

Strijdom, we are knocking at your door! Laden down with thousands of protest forms, Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophie Williams knock on the door of Prime Minister Strijdom's office.

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a man and his wife must live apart from each other in different areas, hound them day and night. They understand that they, as women, are essential in the struggle for a better life. The road from Pretoria leads forward. The way will be bitter, but there is no turning

back. The women of South Africa have set their faces towards the future. They are determined to help in the fight for liberation of their families; and in so doing, they have taken the first great stride forward in liberating themselves.

On December 5th 1956, after this pamphlet had been written, 19 women and 137 men — 156 people of all races from all over South Africa, were arrested before daybreak on a charge of High Treason. Amongst them are leading members of the Federation of South African Women; the National President, Lilian Ngoyi; National Secretary, Helen Joseph; National Vice-President Martha Motlakoana; and Executive Members Frances Baard and Bertha Mashaba.

While these women leaders sit in a courtroom, unable to work, the women of South Africa have not been idle, nor ceased their struggle against the hated pass laws.

In the Transvaal, two mass women's cam-

paigns are under way. Half a million pledges are sought from women of all races that they will oppose the pass laws; hundreds of thousands of women will sign a protest against the Group Areas Act which will destroy the homes and livelihood of countless non-white families.

At a time when democratic action against the government becomes more and more difficult, these protests are gathering momentum through the united effort of the women of different races. This is the answer of the women of South Africa to apartheid and racialism. The Pretoria demonstration was but a beginning. The women will yet prove a rock against which oppression will founder.

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Civil servants line the balconies overlooking the amphitheatre to watch the amazing scene when the women came to make their memorable protest.

THE DEMAND OF THE WOMEN OF SOUTH AFRICA FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF PASSES FOR WOMEN AND THE REPEAL OF THE PASS LAWS

We, the women of South Africa, have come here today. We represent and we speak on behalf of hundreds of thousands of women who could not be with us. But all over the country, at this moment, women are watching and thinking of us. Their hearts are with us.

We are women from every part of South Africa. We are women of every race, we come from the cities and the towns, from the reserves and the villages. We come as women united in our purpose to save the African women from the degradation of passes.

For hundreds of years the African people have suffered under the most bitter law of all — the pass law which has brought untold suffering to every African family.

Raids, arrests, loss of pay, long hours at the pass office, weeks in the cells awaiting trial, forced farm labour — this is what the pass laws have brought to African men. Punishment and misery — not for a crime, but for the lack of a pass.

We African women know too well the effect of this law upon our homes, our children. We, who are not African women, know how our sisters suffer.

Your Government proclaims aloud at home and abroad that the pass laws have been abolished, but we women know this is not true, for our husbands, our brothers, our sons are still being arrested, thousands every day, under these very pass laws. It is only the name that has changed. The "reference book" and the pass are one.

In March 1952, your Minister of Native Affairs denied in Parliament that a law would be introduced

which would force African women to carry passes. But in 1956 your Government is attempting to force passes upon the African women, and we are here today to protest against this insult to all women. For to us an insult to African women is an insult to all women.

We want to tell you what the pass would mean to an African woman, and we want you to know that whether you call it a reference book, an identity book, or by any other disguising name, to us it is a PASS. And it means just this:—

- That homes will be broken up when women are arrested under pass laws.
- That children will be left uncared for, helpless, and mothers will be torn from their babies for failure to produce a pass.
- That women and young girls will be exposed to humiliation and degradation at the hands of pass-searching policemen.
- That women will lose their right to move freely from one place to another.

In the name of women of South Africa, we say to you, each one of us, African, European, Indian, Coloured, that we are opposed to the pass system.

We, voters and voteless, call upon your Government not to issue passes to African women.

We shall not rest until ALL pass laws and all forms of permits restricting our freedom have been abolished.

We shall not rest until we have won for our children their fundamental rights of freedom, justice, and security.

PRESENTED TO THE PRIME MINISTER —
AUGUST 9th 1956.

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Many mothers brought their children. They were tired — but their spirit was unquenched. Photo: Drumm.

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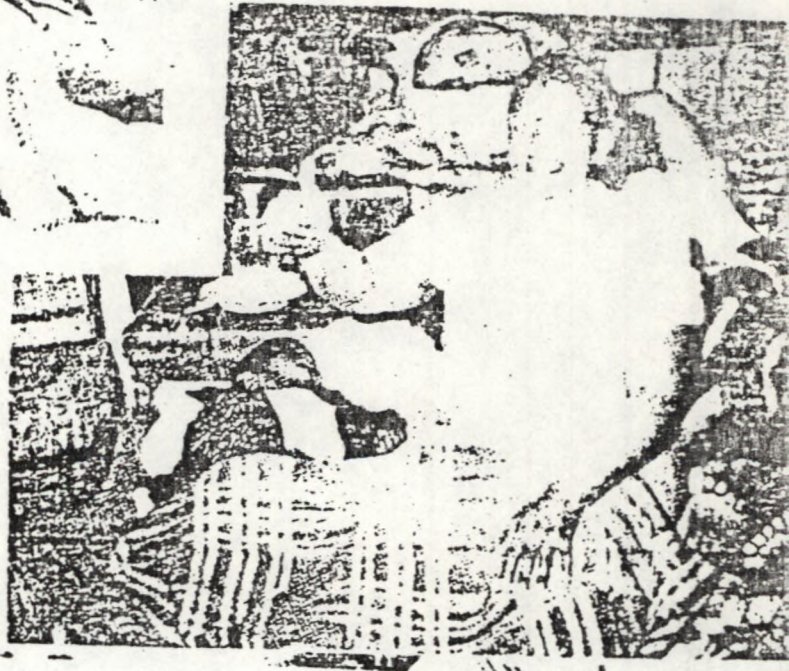
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• P. Altman in "Fighting Talk".

city, expressing the bitter feeling of African women right through the country against the pass laws.

And throughout the country, the echoes of that demonstration resounded. The conservative "white press" commented on the impressive, moving dignity and discipline of the women. "Those women assembled in Pretoria in their thousands", stated the Argus editorial comment, "are still only a small reflection of the deep resentment that this unnecessary legislation has aroused. To ignore them and what they represent deepens stupidity into monumental folly."

AND NOW?

"The women's campaign has been a model of patient and peaceful organisation," wrote New Age. "What more can they do than they have done to make clear to the authorities what they want — or rather what they don't want? . . . Does Strijdom think, because he turns a deaf ear, that they will tamely give

Strijdom was not to be found, but the protest forms were left in his office.

When the five representatives returned, to report to the assembled women that the Prime Minister had refused to see them, the women rose to their feet, thumbs up in the "Afrika" salute, to stand for a full thirty minutes in absolute silence as a protest.

"Thirty minutes: It is nothing in time . . . yet it is an eternity. Complete silence, except for the crying of babies. The sun was hot above; the magnificent lawns and gardens of the Union Buildings lay peacefully below. The women were immobile, frozen images, their thumbs uplifted . . . thirty quiet minutes . . . I was moved to tears . . ."

"The thirty minutes silence ended, and 20,000 voices, in magnificent four-part harmony, sang 'Nkosi sikilele' Afrika' and 'Morena Boloka.' The singing reached the sky and then I knew a moment of triumph. Nothing will defeat these women, their wives, these mothers."

The singing of the women as they dispersed echoed across South Africa's capital

A commissioner tried to refuse the delegation entry on the grounds that there were representatives of all races among them! "No Apartheid!" said Helen Joseph. Finally they were admitted.

Photo: Druni.

up the fight? RATHER WILL THEY INTENSIFY THEIR STRUGGLE TENFOLD.

And so Pretoria was not the end, but the beginning. Two days later, women at the second National Conference of the Federation of South African Women, resolved to take the struggle against pass laws to every woman throughout the land; to the isolated farms and country dorps; to villages and reserves; to obtain pledges of opposition to passes from women everywhere.

For the women well understand that this is a bitter struggle, demanding everything they can give. They know now that there is no refuge for them in their homes; they cannot provide for their children by keeping quiet or "leaving it to the men." Poverty, hardship, insufficient food and clothes, inadequate housing, they have always known. Now they know, as well, that the laws of the country invade what homes they have, walk right into their kitchens, pervert the minds of their children, tear families asunder, demand that

Strijdom, we are knocking at your door! Laden down with thousands of protest forms, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophie Williams knock on the door of Prime Minister Strijdom's office.

Photo: Druni.

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