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Rev "A.E. 6"

THE FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN



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Why do we talk about the Federation ?

The purpose of this booklet is to give women a starting point for thinking about and discussing:

- how we should organise
- how we can learn from the past
- how we can prepare for the future.

When the Federation was formed, there was a lot of discussion about its structure and about how it should work. There is always a lot of debate when new organisations are being formed. Many questions need to be asked by the people going into an organisation. Often it is useful to look at the problems other people have had in their organisations.

The Federation of South African Women is the organisation in which we have our roots. It is the organisation which established the tradition of women's organisation in the struggle for a free and democratic South Africa. It is the history of this organisation that has given us experience and pride as women in the struggle in South Africa. 9th August, National Women's Day, was achieved for us by the women of the Federation.

In this booklet on the Federation, we look at our roots. And we do this seriously in order to understand the conditions and difficulties of organising women at that time. We examine the problems, the strengths and victories, failures and weaknesses of the Federation. When we go deep into these problems, we do not want to be negative. We want to learn how to apply the gains of the past to the needs of the present.

We are trying to build up organisations in which everyone, all members, participate in the discussion and make the decisions. To do this we need to communicate ideas and start discussion as widely as possible. Many women today do not know about the Federation of South African Women. Many of us were too young, or were inactive in the 1950's. We wrote this booklet to change this and to tell people about the Federation and the women's struggle in the 1950's. We are asking questions about how women should organise now in 1982. But we do not have the answers to put forward. All the women of South Africa must work together to answer these questions. This is part of the struggle to form organisations and part of the fight for our demands.

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paying as little as possible. There were many struggles. The people demanded proper housing, and reasonable bus and train fares. For example, the people of Evaton and Alexandra boycotted buses when the fares were increased.

The Nationalist government's Apartheid policy was also designed to divide the oppressed people along racial lines. It did this to make the unity of the oppressed people in opposition to the government more difficult. The government divided the South African nation into small groups. The government tried to make a different 'deal' with each race group. They wanted each group to fight for its own separate interests.

The Nationalist government introduced laws to exclude the oppressed and exploited masses from all political organisation and from representative bodies. In 1951 Parliament passed the Bantu Authorities Act. This Act set up Tribal, Regional and Territorial Authorities with limited powers to control the lives of the African people. From 1951, the government tried to take the right to vote for Members of Parliament of their own choice away from the coloureds. But the opposition to this forced the government to try new ways. It finally won the battle in 1956, and took away the vote. In 1959 the government introduced a new law called the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act. This Act changed the reserve areas into 'homelands' with a separate government of its own. The government wanted African people to make their demands to their particular tribal government, and not to the central government. Meaningful political rights...

It is important to note that while the research and writing was done by a group of members mandated by the United Women's Organisation, the views expressed in this publication are not necessarily the views of the organisation. This booklet has not yet been discussed by the branches. It has not been approved by the UWO Executive Council or by the Executive Committee.

The booklet is still to be read - by the UWO and by all interested people in South Africa. It is designed to get people talking about the important questions facing women who want to get organised. Above all, it is intended to encourage an interest in women's organisation and a pride in the Federation of South African Women.

4 How was the Federation the Federation?

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The 1950's were a new period in South Africa. The Nationalist government came to power in 1948 and forced its Apartheid policy on the people of South Africa. This policy helped to give industry the cheap labour it needed to grow fast and to make big profits. Life was very hard for most people in South Africa after the Second World War. But it was particularly hard for the families of the workers. The women of these families struggled to make ends meet. It was harder for these people because the government tried to prevent the workers from demanding high wages, so that industry could make

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their profits. The government also tried to save money by paying as little as possible for housing and transport for working people. There were many struggles in the 1950's when the people demanded proper housing, and reasonable bus and train fares. For example, the people of Evaton and Alexandra boycotted buses when the fares were increased.

The Nationalist government's Apartheid policy was also designed to divide the oppressed people along racial lines. It did this to make the unity of the oppressed people in opposition to the government more difficult. The government divided the South African nation into small groups. The government tried to make a different 'deal' with each race group. They wanted each group to fight for its own separate interests.

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PEOPLE ORGANISE AGAINST REPRESSION:

The people showed their opposition to the government more strongly in the 1950's than ever before. People came forward in their masses to build their organisations. Before the War, the leaders had been on their own. After the War, the leaders had the support of the masses. In their campaigns, people

showed that it was not just the leaders who wanted to protest. Thousands of people protested. One big and important struggle was the Defiance Campaign in 1952. Thousands of volunteers led by the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Indian Congress, defied unjust laws. For many women, this campaign was their first political experience. But they continued in the struggle after the Defiance Campaign ended.

At this time in South Africa, a number of other organisations were growing. The ways people were fighting their struggles were changing. The ANC had existed since 1912, but in 1949 in the Programme of Action, it adopted a new strategy. The South African Indian Congress had worked with the ANC from the Programme of Action. Together these two organisations had planned the Defiance Campaign. They mobilised people in large numbers around the calls for action. In 1953, people in various places felt the need for other organisations to draw unorganised people into the struggle alongside the ANC and South African Indian Congress. In Johannesburg, a group of white activists formed an organisation called the Congress of Democrats. They joined with the newly formed organisation, the Democratic League in Cape Town, to form the South African Congress of Democrats. It was small and based mainly in Johannesburg and Cape Town. There were a lot of questions that this organisation sorted out in these early years. Questions like: what was its role in the struggle? what was its relationship to the ANC? Also in 1953, but in the Western Cape, a group of people decided that they needed an organisation to work with the coloured people. Up till then the coloured people had no long term organisation. An organisation was started. One of the first things it did was to try to set up branches in other regions. Then at the end of 1953, these groups all came together. They formed the South African Coloured Peoples Organisation. This was later called the Coloured Peoples Congress or CPC.

In Europe in 1945, an organisation called the Women's International Democratic Federation was formed. The aims of the organisation were to fight for women's rights, for peace and for freedom. Some women in South Africa knew about this organisation and sent a delegate to the conferences in 1947, 1951 and 1953. These women saw that the Women's International Democratic Federation had made women a powerful force in many countries. They thought that South Africa needed a similar kind of women's organisation. They wanted a national women's organisation to draw together all the small women's organisations.

In all the different regions of South Africa, women had already formed organisations and were asking the question: why a women's organisation? In the Transvaal, the ANC Women's League was strong and well organised. There were also women outside of the Women's League who talked about organising women. In Natal, there was not really a women's organisation. But women in the ANC and Natal Indian Congress thought that a women's organisation was a good idea. In Port Elizabeth, a group of women from the trade unions and from the ANC met to talk about forming a women's organisation. One of the trade union organisers from Cape Town was at this meeting, and so contact was established between these two centres. In Cape Town, there were a number of small women's organisations like the Women's Food Committees and the Cape Housewives League. In the Western Cape, women were organised into the ANC and Food and Canning Workers Union as well. There were also women who had been active in the Communist Party. They all wanted a women's organisation.

The aims of the Federation.

THE UNITY OF ALL WOMEN:

It was in this climate of the growth of new organisations that the Federation of South African Women was formed. The ANC and SAIC had committed themselves to the struggle for national liberation. To the women who formed the Federation, liberation also meant freedom from discrimination on the grounds of sex. The Women's Charter was adopted at the first conference of the Federation. The Charter reached out to 'Working Women of South Africa' and called for, '...solidarity in the struggle against apartheid, racism, sexism and capitalist exploitation'. It is clear that these women understood the demands made on them by the national liberation struggle. To work for freedom, they would have to fight against ideas that women should be inferior and passive. They had to show themselves capable of planned political action. Through this work they could liberate the whole of society.

At the first conference in 1954, women from organisations all over the country met. The majority of the women came from the ANC. One may ask why a national women's organisation was necessary when a women's organisation already existed, namely the ANC Women's League in the Transvaal. There were many women's organisations throughout the country which were independent of the ANC and had no political affiliations. There were religious groups, Mothers Unions, and the National Council of African Women. The answer to this question is that the leaders of the Federation saw the need to unite all women to prepare them for the struggles ahead. They wanted an organisation to unite women, non-racially.



Part of the crowd at the first conference of the Federation of South African Women.

The women who came from other political organisations had experienced prejudice against their activeness from their men colleagues. Often they found themselves making tea rather than taking part in discussions. They regarded this as an obstacle to progress. This was expressed in the Women's Charter as follows: '...The law has become an obstacle to the progress of women and therefore a brake on the whole society. This intolerable condition would not be allowed to continue were it not for the refusal of a large section of our menfolk to

concede to us women the rights and privileges which they demand for themselves....they cannot hope to liberate themselves from the evils of discrimination and prejudice as long as they fail to extend to women complete and unqualified equality in law and in practice'.

WHY A NATIONAL FEDERATION?

Even though the Federation took up these national issues, they did not often organise nationally co-ordinated campaigns. For example, the 1954 rent increases applied to all locations throughout the country. The Federation national executive called on women of all regions to take up the issue. But the women fought the rent increases only in Johannesburg and in Cape Town. There was no national co-ordination of the campaign. The women of each region decided how they would work in their area completely on their own.

But if the Anti-Pass Campaign was the only national campaign, then why did women see the need for national organisation? Although it did not organise many national campaigns the Federation kept women of different regions in contact with one another. The Federation helped the women in the regions to see their problems as part of the people's problems. The Federation regional committees took up issues of national importance. Through the national conferences, women could learn about the problems of other areas, and about how women organised in other areas. There was a national conference in 1954. The Federation and the ANC Women's League had a joint conference in 1956 about the Anti-Pass Campaign. In August 1956, after the march to Pretoria, the Federation held its second conference. The last national conference was in 1961 after the banning of the Women's League. This discussion about how people organised in other areas is always an important part of any organisation. We can learn from the problems other people faced, and how they overcame these problems. A national Federation was important for another reason. Women in each region realised that they were not on their own. They were part of a nation-wide mass movement of women which was part of the liberation struggle.

The structure of the Federation.

One of the most important things the women in the Federation had to decide on was the structure of their organisation. This was not a simple problem. It needed a lot of discussing and debating. Discussion took place at the first conference. But it needed more than that. After the conference women discussed the draft constitution and the structure in their organisations and amongst themselves.

From the beginning women from all over the country were part of the FSAW. After the first conference they knew that they wanted to form a national organisation. They knew then what their collective goals were. These were set out in the Women's Charter adopted at the first conference. They even had a pretty good idea of what sorts of issues they were likely to take up and organise around. Some of the questions the women had to ask themselves were: How would they work together to achieve their common goals? Should they work together as individuals, in groups, in areas or in separate organisations? Would the Federation have individual membership? Would it have branches in different areas? Would it have only organisations affiliated to it or would it have both individual membership and affiliated organisations? How would all the different areas fit into the organisation as a whole? Another question they had to look at was how women from the different race groups would fit into the structure. How would women in the rural areas where there were no organisations become part of the Federation and keep in contact with things happening in the cities? They wanted to find a way to encourage all the women that agreed with their aims to become part of the Federation in some way, regardless of their race.

WOMEN IN ORGANISATIONS

Many of the women who were involved in the Federation were already part of other political organisations. In 1954, when the Federation was formed it was only the ANC that had a women's section. Before 1954 the ANC Women's League only operated in the Transvaal. From December 1954 to 1956 the Women's League set up regional committees in the different

provinces and was growing fast. By 1956 the ANCWL was organised nationally. Other organisations such as the Congress of Democrats (COD), the South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO) and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) didn't have their own women's sections.

Women were also organised in other types of women's organisations, e.g. the Cape Housewife's League, and in trade unions. Many of these women were keen to become part of a national women's organisation. Some women found that they could be in three different organisations at the same time. For example, a coloured woman working in a canning factory could be in the Federation, SACPO and the Food and Canning Workers Union at the same time. Many women had to work out if they could be active in more than one organisation at the same time.

The women had to decide on what kind of structure the Federation should have. Would membership of the Federation draw women away from other organisations? Different organisations may have different ideas about how to run a campaign. How would decision-making take place, with women scattered all over the country in different organisations? Many women were not in organisations at all. How would activities in the different areas be coordinated? How would women in the different areas be kept in contact with each other?

SECOND FEDERATION CONFERENCE:

Women from all over the country attended the second conference in 1956. Though most of the women were from the Transvaal. At this conference after long discussion, a constitution was adopted. It was seen 'as a working basis on which regions can be correctly constituted, on which women's organisations can be invited to affiliate and the work of the Federation can go forward' (FSAW A1). The ANC was the dominant organisation in the Congress Alliance. The ANCWL represented the largest and most organised women's organisation in the country. Some people felt that individual membership would lead to divided loyalties. They feared that it could lead to a situation where the Federation and the ANCWL competed for members, or that the Federation would draw women away from the ANCWL into a separate organisation.

So they gave up the idea of individual membership. They decided that it was better to concentrate on strengthening those women's organisations that already existed. They would also build new organisations, clubs, and societies which could affiliate to the Federation.

ORGANISATIONS AFFILIATED TO THE FEDERATION

The women in the Federation also realised that it was only the ANC and the African women who had a strong women's organisation. A lot of women were completely unorganised. They were not part of any organisation. They tried to solve this problem in two ways:

- 1) In some of the areas women tried to set up new women's organisations that could affiliate to the Federation. This was done in Cape Town in 1956 when the Non-European Women's League was formed. The Non-European Women's League tried to draw in unorganised coloured women. This organisation affiliated to the Federation.
- 2) General organisations could also affiliate to the Federation. Women in the Food and Canning Workers Union, South African Coloured People's Organisation and the Congress of Democrats could all be part of the Federation because their organisation affiliated to it.

This meant that the Federation was a mixture of different organisations. The ANCWL was a nation-wide organisation open to Africans only. COD and SACPO were also nation-wide and they were open to a particular race group. But they were not women's organisations. F&CWU was a nation-wide trade union. The Non-European Women's League and the Cape Housewife's League were women's organisations in Cape Town.

This mixture of different organisations was the Federation's strength in one sense and its weakness in another. Because it covered such a wide range of organisations in its affiliates, the Federation could draw on women from the factories, on the housewives and on women of all races to support its campaigns. The Federation could mobilise the masses of women around particular issues. An example of this was the march of 20 000 women to Pretoria on the 9th August 1956.

But women still often felt divided loyalties between their own organisations and the Federation. They were often not sure what organisation they were working for in any particular campaign. Meetings of the affiliate organisations and the Federation branches were often held together. For example in Paarl the Federation business was dealt with at the end of the F&CWU meetings.

CONFERENCES AND DECISION MAKING

The main policy decisions of the Federation occurred at the national and regional conferences. At the national conference women from different organisations and from all over the country would get together to discuss their grievances and to

report on activities in their areas. They would pass resolutions and plan activities for the future.

But decisions about activities had to be made far more often than at the conferences. National conferences were expensive at a time when most of the members and the organisation itself was poor and travelling was expensive and time-consuming. Conferences were quite difficult to organise. They had to be planned well in advance so that as many women as possible could attend. Organisations needed time to elect representatives. Most of the women who would attend were working women. They had to take a few days of work to travel and attend the conference. The national conferences were usually in Johannesburg, which made it difficult for women from the Cape to attend.

Regional conferences were also very important to discuss issues and make decisions and plans. Women from different organisations were invited to attend the regional conferences. Their organisations were invited to affiliate to the Federation. But in some areas the women in the Federation felt that they needed to strengthen organisation in their regions, before they had a regional conference.

NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Because of the difficulty of having frequent conferences it was important for there to be a central decision making body within the Federation. This was the National Executive Committee of the Federation. This consisted of the National President, 4 National Vice-Presidents (one from each province), a treasurer and a general secretary, as well as a committee of 20 members. The majority of the committee members lived in the district of the Federation Head Office to form a working committee. They assisted the executive in their tasks. These were all elected by the women at the National Conference. The executive would work in the centre where the Federation Head Office was situated. This was first in Cape Town but moved to Johannesburg in 1956.

CONTACT AT A NATIONAL LEVEL

The different regions had regional executives and committees. These were supposed to be elected at the regional conferences. In some areas there were not enough women to be active on the committees so an election didn't really happen.

Contact between the regions and head office was emphasised. The regions were asked to write reports and send news. The Head Office could then let each region know what was

happening in other areas and coordinate activities. In the fifties many national issues were taken up by organisations. It was important for the Federation to be able to communicate with all the regions when a national issue was taken up. It seems that the communication wasn't always good. This was especially so after the Head Office moved to Johannesburg.

The NEC often sent out memoranda and circulars to the regions. The circulars called on the women in the different areas to support a particular campaign. Many of these campaigns originated from within the Congress Alliance. But they also came from discussion and grievances that the women had voiced at the conferences. The executive would discuss plans in greater detail and send their recommendations to the regional committees for discussion and action. For example, during the anti-pass campaign the NEC recommended to the regions that they form broad anti-pass committees with other organisations (even with those outside the Congress Alliance).

Recommendations of this kind were often taken up by the different regions in different ways. This depended on the specific conditions in the region, such as how strong the Federation was in that region, what other local campaigns they were involved in at the time and what other organisations existed in the area. For example, the Cape municipal vote was a big issue in the Cape and the Federation in the Cape was very active in the campaign. This was not so in the Transvaal and other provinces. The Transvaal were much more active in the Bantu Education campaign than the Cape was.

What issues did the Federation take up ?

When the Federation took up an issue, what did they want to gain? The Federation of South African Women took up the problems that made people's lives difficult because they were committed to improving the lives of the women in their affiliate organisations. But the organisation also wanted to draw the women into the national liberation struggle. The Federation knew that without the support of all the people in South Africa, freedom would never be won. Women made up half the population. Normally they did not take an active part in political organisation. The Federation wanted to increase the number of people to protest against oppression in South Africa. They took up issues which concerned women in order to mobilise them into this struggle.

What were the people's problems that the Federation was concerned about? We must remember that the Federation worked very closely with Congress Alliance organisation even though it was not officially on the National Consultative Committee. The Congress Alliance had a policy of 'Unity in Action', which meant that no campaigns were ever fought by only one organisation. All these Congress Alliance organisations joined forces to fight for an issue, and they tried to draw other organisations in as well. So decisions to take up an issue were not made only within the Federation structure. Organisations worked together to decide on these questions. To show this we can look at the Pass Campaign, Bantu Education Campaign and the Congress of the People.



1957 anti-pass demonstration in Johannesburg

PASSES FOR AFRICAN WOMEN

From 1950, the threat that african women must carry passes was a heavy burden for the women of South Africa. The men had carried passes for a long time. Women had seen how the men had suffered from the pass laws. Now they too had to carry passes. The ANC opposed passes for women from 1950 when the government first spoke of them. Opposition to the pass laws was central to the ANC policy. The people who were mobilised into the anti-pass campaigns from 1950 till 1960 demanded that the pass laws be abolished.

The Federation was important in the anti-pass campaigns. It took up the issue in most areas of South Africa where the pass unit issued passes. The pass campaigns continued throughout the late 1950's. For example, when the pass unit came to Cape Town, the women voiced their opposition. Many of the women refused to carry passes. In the late 1950's the anti-pass campaigns were the major activity of the Federation and the ANC Women's League. Mainly women were involved in the campaigns during the fifties.



Zeerust women protesting against passes in 1957.

The Anti-Pass Campaign was the only campaign that the Federation organised that was really a national campaign. The march of 20 000 women to the Union Buildings was the result of national organisation. The Federation tried to do two things. They organised women in each area not to take out passes, and co-ordinated the campaign on a national scale. In each area, women worked towards a march to the local Native Commissioner. They also prepared themselves towards sending a deputation to Pretoria. The Anti-Pass Campaign was the only campaign that the Federation took up in each region. This campaign brought women from the cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth together with women from the outlying areas like Zeerust and Winburg. This did not happen in other campaigns.

Why was the Anti-Pass Campaign a nationally co-ordinated campaign? The opposition to passes was, as we have said, especially important and more energy was put into it than into other campaigns. But there was another set of reasons why this campaign was fought nationally. The women of South Africa felt very strongly about the pass issue. They spontaneously showed their resistance to the issuing of passes. Even in areas where the Federation and the ANC Women's League had not been working, women opposed passes. This spontaneous militancy of the women pushed the organisations to take up the campaigns in all areas. The Federation and ANC Women's League also saw that the way that the state was issuing passes, going from one area to another, had to be stopped. In the late 1950's the pass unit went from place to place in South Africa to issue passes to women. One month the pass unit was in Winburg, the next month in Springs, the month after in Sophiatown. This travelling pass unit made it more difficult for women to see the wideness of the issue. The Federation saw the need for a national campaign to overcome these divisions. Through this national campaign, the isolated efforts of the women were brought together. At the same time, the full importance of the issue was brought out.

GROUP AREAS AND RESETTLEMENT

The Federation was also concerned about how the people were forced to move. During the 1950's the Nationalists tried to divide the areas that people lived in along racial lines. This was part of their policy to divide the people and to make unity amongst the oppressed people more difficult. The state worked differently in the different regions of South Africa. But the general problem that the Federation fought against was the same throughout the country, although in each area there were particular problems not found in other areas. For example, in Johannesburg, people were moved from Sophiatown, and there were the Western Areas removals. In Weenen in Natal, people were moved from the areas where they had lived for a long time and left in the veld without houses. In Cape Town, Africans were moved from houses in Blaauwlei, Retreat and from squatter communities in Windemere and Elsie's River, to an emergency camp in Nyanga.

RENT INCREASES

In the 1950's the State increased the rents in a sub-economic housing scheme in all the locations throughout the country. So workers had to pay more money for their houses. The Federation executive wrote to all its regional committees

and affiliates and called on them to take up the issue of the rent increases and the fight against them. This was a problem that affected the daily lives of the African members of the Federation. The organisation opposed the rent increases to fight for better living conditions for the people.

BANTU EDUCATION ACT CAMPAIGN

The Nationalist government strengthened the racial oppression in South Africa through its Apartheid policy. It brought racial oppression into all areas of people's lives. In 1953 Parliament introduced a new law - the Bantu Education Act. This Act put the control over what teachers taught african children in the hands of the government. It was designed to give these children an inferior education to equip them for the role that the government wanted them to play. The introduction of this Act was part of a broader control over education that the government was exercising. The ANC opposed the move to divide education along racial lines and to put it under the control of the government. The ANC's opposition to this move was expressed through a campaign led by the ANC Women's League. The Federation worked closely with the Women's League on this issue, although it only took up the campaign in certain areas.



1959 Cato Manor protests by women against beerhalls met with police repression.

BEERHALLS

The Federation of South African Women also took up the issue of the beerhalls in a number of regions. The government made it illegal to brew beer and to sell it from people's houses. This forced the people to buy beer from the Municipal Beerhall. The campaign against the beerhalls in Cato Manor in 1959 was a particularly militant one. The women marched on the beerhalls armed with sticks and chased the men out. The police tried to prevent the women from going to the beerhall and charged the women with batons. But the women's militancy eventually forced the Municipality to close the beerhall. Many people opposed the beerhalls in other areas as well. In Langa, starting in 1954, the people led by the ANC prevented the Cape Town City Council from building a beerhall for many years.

There were also many other campaigns that the Federation was involved in. For example in 1957, they worked with the Federation of South African Nurses and Midwives to oppose the Nursing Act of 1957. This Act introduced racial segregation into all aspects of the nursing profession. This campaign was taken up in a number of areas. The Federation also fought against bread price increases. For example, in 1961 a group of Federation women in the Western Cape and delegates from other women's organisations went to the Minister of Finance to oppose a proposed increase in the price of bread. The Federation was also involved in opposing train fare and bus fare increases in various places. In Cape Town, when the Municipality tried to introduce apartheid on the buses the Federation was involved in the campaign to oppose this move.

COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

The affiliate organisations of the Federation and the Federation regional committees also took up basic community problems. They fought against bad street lighting, the lack of pedestrian crossings and the shortage of creches. The Federation worked for these kinds of improvements in the different areas, and showed women that the organisation could help them. The Federation then tried to draw these women into bigger campaigns and to raise their political consciousness. For example, in Blaauwlei, women worked together to set up a creche and then demanded a building from the City Council. The parents were all involved in the work at the creche and took decisions about the creche themselves. When the creche had been opened, the women still met to discuss their problems. Some Federation women went to talk to these women about the

Women's International Democratic Federation and about what women were doing in other countries. In this way they brought new ideas to the women of Blaauwlei, and the women saw that their struggle for their creche was part of a bigger struggle.

THE FEDERATION TOOK UP TWO KINDS OF ISSUES:

We have discussed some of the issues that the Federation took up. We can see that there were two kinds of issues:

- 1) Community problems that affected only one particular area. Here we mentioned the creche at Blaauwlei, but there was also the creche at Wynberg, and the campaign to get toilets at Nyanga Emergency Camp.
- 2) National problems that were a result of the policy of the South Africa state, like passes, Bantu Education and removals. We saw that these problems were often slightly different in each region.

How did the Federation organise ?

Now we need to ask how did the Federation of South African Women organise? How did they take up issues? How did they fight campaigns around these issues? When the Federation took up a community issue, they worked in their own area only. But they used many methods to fight for their demands. They used the same kind of methods in the local campaigns as they used when the Federation fought issues of national importance.

JOINT CAMPAIGNS WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS

We said earlier that the Federation of South African Women was part of the Congress Alliance. They worked very closely with the other organisations that were part of the alliance. But the Federation also worked together in campaigns with organisations which were not part of the Congress Alliance. It was the policy of the Federation to work with as wide a range of organisations as possible. This policy was called the 'Unity in Action' policy. In the locations, the Federation worked with the Manyano women (1), religious groups, social clubs and the National Council of African Women. In the broader campaigns, they worked with their affiliate organisations and with other organisations that were not affiliated. For example, in the Anti-Pass Campaign in Cape Town after 1957, the Federation and the ANC Women's League worked with the National Council of Women, the Black Sash, Anglican Mothers' Union, the Quaker Service Fund, the South African

Institute of Race Relations, and other organisations. In 1954, the ANC and other organisations decided to call on the people of South Africa to bring forward their demands for freedom. They worked towards the Congress of the People in June 1955. This Congress drew up the Freedom Charter. The Federation worked with the other organisations in the campaign leading up to this representative gathering. After the Congress of the People, the organisations organised a campaign to tell the people about the Freedom Charter. And all the Congress Alliance organisations adopted the Freedom Charter. The Federation held a Congress of Mothers in the Transvaal and in the Western Cape to discuss the Charter.



Indian women have traditionally been kept in the background in political activity. In 1955 these Indian women broke through backward tradition when they attended the Congress of the People.

ORGANISING A CAMPAIGN

The Federation wanted to draw as many people as possible into the campaigns and to make the protests as big as possible. The Federation believed that mass support for demands would

force the government to do away with racial oppression. There were a lot of ways in which the Federation organised to take up issues. We can look at some of the campaigns to show the methods that the Federation used to organise.

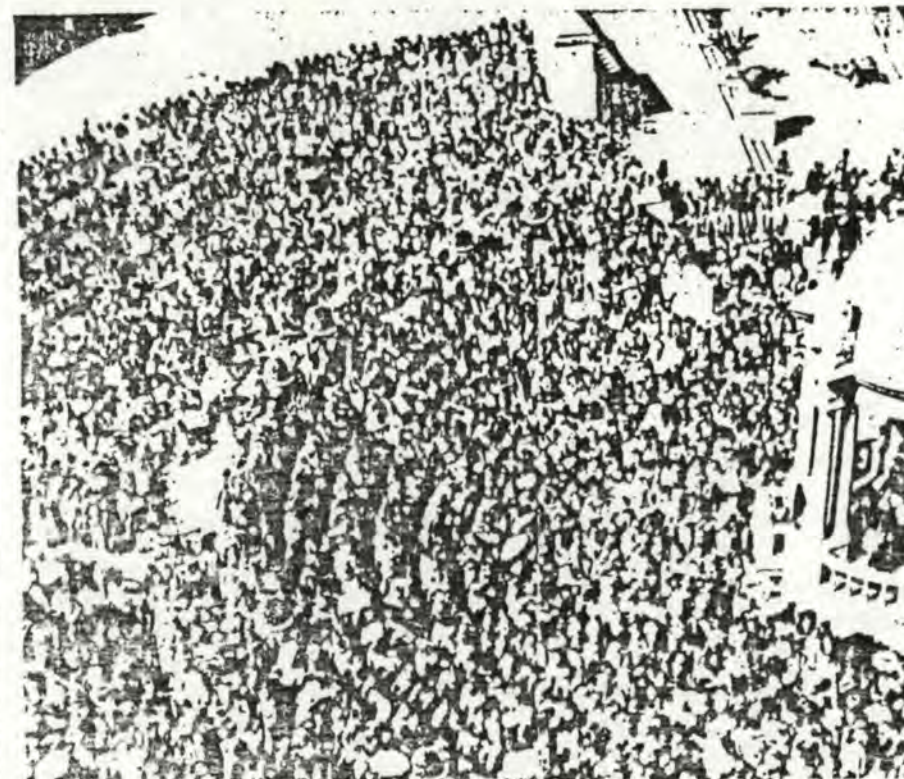
Before 1956, the Anti-Pass Campaign was not a national campaign. In each region, the Federation regional committees set themselves a goal. In the Transvaal, the women decided to march to the Union Buildings in October 1955. The leadership decided that this was an important way to show the women's opposition to the passes. The Transvaal was an area where the ANC was very strong at that time and the Federation, ANC and ANC Women's League worked very closely together.

In each township on the Reef, the Women's League women came together for a meeting with the Federation leaders. They discussed the march and each woman took pamphlets back to her own area. These women then went from door to door in their street talking about the pass laws and how women should oppose the passes. The each ANC woman invited a woman to hold a meeting in her house and to call the women of her street to that meeting.

At these house meetings, the members of the ANC Women's League distributed the pamphlets and asked women to sign a petition to the Prime Minister. They also told women about the march to the Union Buildings on 27 October 1955 to take these petitions to the Prime Minister. In this way, 2 000 women from the Reef townships were mobilised to march to see Strijdom, the Prime Minister.

In 1956, the same methods were used to mobilise 20 000 women to take petitions to the Prime Minister. But this time the women came from all over South Africa. In each region, the Federation regional committees with the ANC Women's League and the affiliate organisations, used the same methods to tell women about the march. There were also area meetings organised in each region. In the Western Cape for example, the Federation held well-attended meetings in Langa, Elsies River, Blaauwlei, Stellenbosch and Worcester. Women at these meetings decided to march to the Native Affairs Commissioner in Salt River as well as to send delegates to Pretoria. They elected special committees to go door-to-door to collect names for the petition. A deputation of women from the Federation of South African Women, and from South African Women and from affiliated organisations like the Food and Canning Workers Union, ANC Women's League, Congress of Democrats and South African Coloured People's

Organisation took the petition to Salt River. This deputation reported back to mass meetings held in all the areas after the protest march. On 2 September, there was an enormous mass rally on the Parade in Cape Town attended by women from all over the Western Cape. At this meeting the women planned the next stage of the campaign.



Twenty thousand women protesting against passes at the Union Buildings in 1956.

During the 1950's a newspaper called New Age was put together by members of the Congress Alliance. It came out every Thursday. New Age helped in the organisation of campaigns. Volunteers sold the newspaper on the streets and many people who were not members of the Congress Alliance organisations bought it. Organisations advertised meetings in this newspaper

and called on other organisations to join the campaigns. In the early 1950's Parliament had taken the vote away from the coloured people. This was part of the Apartheid policy of the government. Then in 1956, the Cape Provincial Administration decided to use the same system in Municipal elections. They decided to take the vote away from certain sections of the population. This affected the coloured women directly, because although they did not have a vote for Parliament, they had always been allowed to vote for City Councillors. The Federation organised a 'Defend the Municipal Vote' campaign. The Federation regional committee decided to call other organisations to a conference to plan united action. They wrote an article for New Age, the people's newspaper, and called on all organisations in the Western Cape to attend a 'Defend the Municipal Vote Conference' the next week. This conference elected an action committee from the people at the meeting to co-ordinate the campaign. One of the things that it did was to ask organisations to demand that Provincial Councillors oppose this racial segregation in municipal affairs. The committee also distributed pamphlets and organised mass meetings. In this way they showed the Cape Provincial Administration that the people of Cape Town did not want a segregated Cape Town City Council.

Federation women also used to talk to people on the crowded trains going home in the evenings, or at bus stops. Large crowds gathered around these women to hear what they said. Whenever people gathered together, members of the Federation and ANC Women's League spoke out about the campaigns and the struggle. Often in Cape Town, open air meetings took place on the Parade at lunch time. People went to the Parade during their lunch break and Federation women went there to talk to people who had little experience of political organisations (2).

The way that the Federation took up a campaign depended on what kind of issue it was. In the Anti-Pass Campaign, there were mass meetings, placard demonstrations at the pass units, petitions to the Native Commissioners and to the Prime Minister. When the government increased the rents in sub-economic housing the Federation used a number of approaches to oppose the increases. They held mass meetings, and the hundreds of people at those meetings urged the City Council to decrease the rents. The increases were also fought through the courts. In April 1955, the court confirmed that the new rents which the people of Langa were paying were illegal. The old rents were brought back.

WHO WERE THE WOMEN IN THE FEDERATION CAMPAIGNS?

Women who joined in the Congress Alliance campaigns were not necessarily members of any organisation. Some of them were not incorporated into the organisational decision-making processes. Other women did participate in the Federation's affiliate organisations in an ongoing sense. They went to conferences and continued to work for these organisations in later campaigns. The rank and file members of the Federation were in fact the rank and file members of the affiliate organisations.

Problems of the Federation .

BACKGROUND OF THE WOMEN

For many women who joined the affiliates of the Federation, this was their first experience in any political organisation. They brought with them enthusiasm, the will to work, and the awareness that something had to be done about their position as oppressed women. But they were inexperienced in political organisation. There were some women involved in these organisations who did have experience, awareness and organisational skills. This group made up the leadership of the Federation.

Having all the experienced people at the head of the organisation was not good in the long run. This made for a top-heavy organisation. It was the aim of the leadership to draw in women who had not been involved in other organisations. This they did in some areas. The women and the affiliate organisations gained as a result. But at the same time, the vast differences in background and experience were a problem. Some women found it easier to contribute than others. The organisational skills and benefits of political experience did not reach women who had just come into mass political organisation.

LACK OF ONGOING ORGANISATION

In the past, the nature of organisation among women was not planned. As issues arose, they were taken up. The women did not plan for a long-term organisation. An example was the Food Committees of the 1940's. There was a food shortage in the 1940's. Food vans took food to the poorer areas and sold

it at controlled prices. The shortage grew worse, and the more well-off women used the vans too. The people who controlled the vans gave first preference to white women. The other women were angry, and began to organise themselves. Each queue had a committee, which had weekly meetings. Representatives of the food committees formed a General Committee. This General Committee formed an Action Committee.

The leadership did try to use the food shortage to mobilise women on a long-term basis. This can be seen by the slogan of the time, 'Today We Fight for Food, Tomorrow for the Vote, And Then For Freedom For All'. However, when the issue itself had died down, long-term organisation was forgotten. The possibilities for long-term organisation were lost.

The Federation realised that ongoing organisation was necessary, but they had to deal with the fact that there was no tradition of ongoing organisation among women.

SEXIST ATTITUDES

Most men, even those in the forefront of popular organisations, still regarded the women as natural inferiors. They saw women as mothers and wives, and were against their direct political involvement. The women too had to break down their own ideas of themselves as slaves in their own homes. They had to realise that they could do things, that they could organise.

These were some of the problems of history and background with which the Federation started out.

RELATIONS WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS

The Federation was linked to the Congress Alliance, and the Federation itself was an umbrella body consisting of a number of women's organisations. On both levels, the Federation had problems. The 'Unity in Action' policy of the Congress Alliance was a strength. It gave greater force to each issue. With each member organisation working, victory on an issue was nearer. However, it meant that the Federation, a relatively new organisation, had not enough time to build and strengthen itself. Many women were members of the ANC, the ANC Women's League and the Federation. Thus, when these bodies had work to do, and needed people to work, time and attention, the women were often busy in their own organisations.

THE FEDERAL STRUCTURE

The organisations of the Federation came from areas with different problems. Also, the areas were often far apart. This made it difficult to organise on a national scale.

Also, affiliates included different kinds of organisations. There were political organisations, housewife's organisations, trade unions and other women's organisations. Each of these organisations had its own special issues and problems.

RURAL AREAS

Activity was concentrated in the industrial and most densely-populated regions. It was difficult to organise the rural areas. In these areas tribal traditions were much more respected and practised than in the urban areas. It was harder for the women in these areas to realise that mothers and wives can also organise.

Workers on the farms in South Africa have always lacked organisation. For these reasons, the Federation found it difficult to organise the women in the rural areas.

STATE REPRESSION

Laws were passed which severely limited the activities of the organisations and individuals. In 1950 the Suppression of Communism Act was passed, which gave the Minister of Justice tight control over gatherings and over what individuals did. Banning orders and police harassment meant that many of the leaders could not work effectively. In 1953 a Public Safety Act was passed, which enabled the authorities to declare a state of emergency over all parts of the country. They could bring in emergency regulations and take any action that they thought was necessary. There were mass arrests, and people were imprisoned. People could suffer beatings, large fines or jail sentences if they 'disturbed the peace' or 'incited' anyone. This was in terms of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1953.

They made it difficult for the popular organisations to function in cities. The Native Laws Amendment Act of 1952 meant that Africans could only live in urban areas under certain conditions. This disrupted political activity in the urban areas. Thousands of people were forced into the Reserves.

All these things caused problems for the Federation, especially when it came to:

- 1) representation at meetings and conferences,
- 2) open-air meetings and rallies,
- 3) movement from province to province.

DEMOCRACY

Democratic decision-making was a problem. Areas were far apart. Executive meetings were difficult to convene, because

of the distances members had to travel, and because of police harassment. Decisions taken in executive meetings were not always fully discussed in the affiliate organisations. This was because these organisations had their own matters to see to. Also the types of things one organisation was concerned about were often different from those another was concerned about. This sometimes led to undemocratic practices in the Federation.

The headquarters had to be in one place. This affected the flow of information to and from other areas. It also affected democracy in the organisation.

LACK OF FUNDS

Finance was a problem. The Federation, being a national body, needed finance for conferences, trips, campaigns, local and regional work. A lot of energy went into fund raising activities, but collection of subs was often not very well organised.

The problems of the Federation grew out of the conditions of the 1950's. But many of them are problems that any political organisation in South Africa may encounter in organising on a national scale.

Why was the Federation inactive in the 1960's ?

The structure of the Federation had a very strong effect on the way it developed. The events of the early sixties meant that the Federation had to reassess their organisation's future. But it was not the only factor that influenced the Federation at this time. And there were a number of reasons why by 1962 people heard very little of the Federation of South African Women.

THE EFFECT OF THE TREASON TRIAL ON THE FEDERATION

The early 1960's were a difficult time for the Federation of South African Women. But the Federation had already been weakened by the Treason Trial. 156 men and women were arrested in December 1956 and charged with high treason. The National President, National Secretary, National Vice-President from the Free State and three other members of the National Executive of the Federation were arrested. From 1957 to 1959, there was little chance for a national conference.

In 1959 the Federation postponed the idea of a national conference to provide for an opportunity for a full National Conference of the ANC Women's League. We have already said that the Federation was top-heavy - the leaders were too important in the organisation. Now, with the leaders in detention, the Federation was badly weakened.

SHARPEVILLE

In 1960 a number of organisations joined together in a mass anti-pass demonstration. Large crowds of people gathered at police stations and demanded to be arrested because they did not have their passes. They had decided to leave them at home. The police were taken aback by this mass defiance. In Sharpeville 69 people were shot dead by the police. In Langa, two people died when the police opened fire on the crowds. During the next week, in all the regions of South Africa, people showed their horror and opposition to the Sharpeville shootings. In Cape Town on 30 March, 30 000 people marched from Langa to Parliament. The government was threatened by the response of the people and acted fast. They declared a State of Emergency for five months throughout the country and detained many people. Then the State declared the ANC, ANC Women's League and Youth League, and the Pan African Congress illegal. This was a difficult time for all organisations. Many of the leaders were in jail. Meetings were illegal. The police increased their attack on organisations and on individuals.

REPRESSION

In the early 1960's the State re-organised the Security police and the security laws. In the early 1950's security policemen sat in meetings openly taking notes. They raided offices and took organisations' documents. From 1960, the Security Police used new methods. They tapped telephones, and tape recorded meetings. They used new methods against people in detention. In the early 1950's the police could not detain people. They had to arrest you and charge you. In 1959 Parliament passed a new law so that they could detain people. But at first they could only hold people for twelve days. Then they changed the law to allow for longer detention - first 90 days, then 180 days. The police used detention to find out about organisations. The government also banished large numbers of leaders to far off places, miles away from the centres where they had organised.

Many of the leaders of the Federation were banned in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Many of the women were detained during the State of Emergency. We saw that the Federation was

a co-ordinating structure. It was made up of committees of leaders from the affiliate organisations. Many women were leaders of more than one organisation. So even if women were detained or banned because of their work in the Women's League, Congress of Democrats or in South African Congress of Trade Unions, this also affected the Federation.

LACK OF DECENTRALISATION

Why did the banning of the leaders affect the Federation so badly? What does this tell us about the way in which the organisation worked? It tells us something about the kind of democracy in the organisation. In the 1950's these organisations worked in such a way that most of the decisions were taken by the national leaders and passed down to regional leaders and so to the members. This kind of democracy did not help all the women in the organisation to take part in all the decisions. Not all the women in the affiliate organisations learnt the skills of leadership and administration. The Federation and Congress Alliance organisations did run training programmes for the leaders but most of the women who joined the campaigns did not learn these skills. In fact the elected leaders tended to hold the power in the organisation. The decisions as to what issue to take up came from the problems grassroots women were experiencing in their communities. These women were not necessarily involved in organisations. But the decisions about the organisation of campaigns were taken by the experienced leaders, both at a regional and national level. There was little decentralisation of decisions and of skills. The mass of the women in the organisation did not gain the experience necessary to carry on the work of the Federation.

BANNING OF THE ANC WOMEN'S LEAGUE

As we saw, the ANC Women's League was the biggest affiliate of the Federation. The State banned the Women's League with the other organisations on 25 March 1960. This meant that it could no longer operate as a legal organisation. The women who had been members of the Women's League could no longer be members of the Federation. At the end of 1960, the Federation Executive decided to set up small organisations to replace the Women's League. These organisations would affiliate to the Federation. They called on regional committees to set up women's groups. In the Transvaal 30 african women's clubs had affiliated to the Federation by October 1961. In the Western Cape there were 11 groups. In the Eastern Cape there were 5 women's groups and in the Free State only 1 group.

These groups affiliated to the Federation. In Natal 19 groups, some anti-pass committees and others Women's Clubs, affiliated to the organisation. But no organisations existed to unite all the african women anymore. Other women were still part of general political organisations like the Coloured People's Congress, Congress of Democrats and the South African Indian Congress. The african women did not even have this now. The Federation had more responsibility now because it was the only uniting link between these groups. Before 1960, most of the grassroots organising work that the Federation had been involved in, had been carried out by the ANC Women's League. Now, this work had to be done by the Federation regional committees. The Federation of South African Women was now the only national women's organisation to draw women into the national liberation struggle.

RE ASSESSMENT

At the 1961 National Conference, the Federation re-examined their position and assessed their organisational strength. They look forward with enthusiasm and determination. They adopted the following resolutions:

- * To assist in building women's groups and clubs that will affiliate to the Federation, and to guide and aid them in their area activities as much as possible;
- * to approach all women's organisations and groups for joint action on specific questions, to build unity of purpose and action among all women's organisations;
- * to assist the development of permanent organised groups among indian women;
- * to help develop women leaders in our own and other organisations by the holding of classes, lecture and discussion groups among women on both practical and political matters;
- * to build up a regular bulletin of news and activities issued by the Federation, as the basis for a progressive women's magazine in the future;
- * to increase the size and strength of our Federation by working among women of all races;
- * to strengthen and extend our association with individual women and with women's organisations in other parts of Africa and other countries, so that they learn more about us and we learn more about them, and through our friendly interchange of news and ideas, assist the spread of peace and understanding throughout the world.

But the Federation was not able to do this. It was not really active after 1961.

EFFECTS OF THE CHANGING CONDITIONS FOR ORGANISATION

With the changing conditions of the time, new methods of organising had to be found. One aspect of the changing conditions was the banning of the ANC Women's League. This was the major affiliate of the Federation. So with its banning, the affiliate structure could no longer work. Things had changed too much. They could not keep the Federation going by rebuilding one part. They would have to start again with a new structure suited to the new conditions.

Also at this time, there was a change in ANC policy. The emphasis moved from peaceful forms of political organisation to armed struggle. This had implications for the other organisations that had worked with the ANC in the Congress Alliance.

In the 1960's the State attempted to cripple organisation of the people permanently. In order to organise effectively leaders and members of organisations had to see that their activities did not attract the attention of the police. This made communication within the organisation difficult. It led to decisions being taken by the leadership without consulting the members. This was undemocratic and gave the leaders too much power. As a result, the organisation was weakened.

It also meant that when the government removed these leaders, the rest of the organisation did not have the skills to carry on.

LESSONS FOR WOMEN'S ORGANISATION

In 1982, there are many lessons we can learn from the Federation of South African Women. It is because we too are fighting against oppression that we talk about the Federation. The Federation National Executive said in 1961: 'Thus we must continue to align ourselves with those who struggle for freedom; the true place of a women's organisation whose members are debarred from political rights is with those who struggle for those very rights.'

But the struggle for freedom in 1982 is very different from the struggles in the 1950's. Then there were six major national organisations that worked closely together and formed the Congress Alliance. This Alliance provided the leadership of the struggle. Today there are few national organisations. Organisations work together on particular issues, but there is no ongoing alliance. We need to ask the question: why are there so few national organisations? And why are the connections between organisations different?

In the 1960's the people's organisations were damaged by the State's repression. And it is only in the last few years

that people have built up organisations again. We saw that even by 1960 it was necessary to change the methods of organising. What new methods and structures do we need now? And what can be taken from the past? When we discuss the Federation of South African Women, we also need to understand why things are different today.

The Federation of South African Women was a child of its time. It was a federation open to affiliation by organisations only, because of the other organisations that existed and were growing at the time. For any organisation to really serve the needs of its members, it too must be a child of its time.

Footnotes .

1. A Manyano is the women's organisation of a Christian Church. They are also sometimes called stokvels. They provided an arena in which women's problems were discussed, ranging from work difficulties to personal problems. The Manyanos functioned according to strict rules and codes of behaviour, and were organised along lines of a strict hierarchy. The fund raising function of the Manyanos was very important. Women in the Manyano would each pay a little every month into a fund. Each month all this money would then go to one of the members on a rotating basis. This meant that women had access to the amounts of money needed to pay for such things as education, hospital fees, debts, furniture costs, etc. Without this kind of system, many of these women would not have been able to afford such things.

2. Today we cannot hold open air meetings or gather people together on a street corner without breaking the law. In 1914, a new law, the Riotous Assemblies Act, was introduced. It has been amended a number of times since then. This Act gives the Minister of Justice the power to ban all open air meetings (except sports meetings) in a particular region. The ban is renewed by the Minister each year. This law has been enforced since 1976 in all the areas of South Africa and so we have to hold our meetings inside a building 'with four walls'.

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Nowhere does the Non-European get a square deal today. In every town there is segregation and discrimination against African, Coloureds and Indians. But there will be more discrimination, and greater injustices if, Olivier, the Administrator has his way.

European and Non-European citizens have lived together in the Cape for the past 300 years. The attacks upon this right is part of the Nationalists' apartheid cruelty to humiliate and force the Non-Europeans into a state of slavery in all spheres of public and private life.

We call upon you to join with us in a determined effort to defeat the Nationalists. Elect delegates to a

DEFEND THE MUNICIPAL VOTE CONFERENCE

to be held on

SATURDAY, 21st APRIL, 1956

in the

LIBRARY, CITY HALL

at 3 p.m.

See that your organisation, Church, and street is represented at this Conference.

Let the women show the way!

Mothers, do not allow your people to be dragged into the ditch of racial oppression, poverty and slavery!

**Rally to the defence of the Municipal Vote without
a colour bar**

**ORGANISE IN YOUR AREAS PROTEST MEETINGS: ELECT
DEPUTATIONS TO THE PROVINCIAL AND MUNICIPAL
COUNCILLORS AND DEMAND HANDS OFF THE VOTE, DOWN
WITH THE COLOUR BAR, AWAY WITH SEGREGATION!!**

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