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THE 1981 RENT BOYCOTT IN DURBAN

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INTRODUCTION

In 1981 community organizations based in sub-economic housing estates in Durban organized a rent boycott in the face of impending rent increases. On the substantive issue, the rent boycott failed, in that the increases were ultimately implemented. This failure served to heighten the sense of alienation and cynicism felt by some residents. More positively, the rent boycott succeeded in that an increased level of consciousness was achieved and valuable links were forged between the participating communities. The final payoff was the establishment of new community organizations and services (1).

THE HISTORY OF THE RENT BOYCOTT

In 1980, the Durban City Council announced its intention to increase the rentals in the housing estates under its control. The Council felt this was necessary since the rising costs were being subsidized by the City's Rate Fund and would otherwise lead to an increase in rates (2).

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A meeting in protest against the increases in Coloured townships was called by the Sydenham Heights Tenants' Association and the Newlands East Residents' Association (NERA). At the meeting Mr Virgile Bonhomme, Natal chairperson of the Labour Party stated that legal action should be taken against the City Council since the increased rentals were needed to offset the losses sustained on redundant land (3). The meeting approved Mr Bonhomme's proposal of a Supreme Court action against the imposition of an average rental increase of 15% (4).

The figure of 15% average rental increase was disputed by Mrs Sybil Hotz, the Deputy Mayor. Depending on whether the housing schemes were classified as economic or sub-economic, the proposed increases were these:

between 3,2% and 15% for Whites;

between 3,8% and 15% for Chatsworth Indian schemes;

between 1,1% and 15% for Phoenix Indian schemes;

between 1,1% and 15% for Newlands East Coloured housing;

between 10,5% and 15% for other Coloured schemes;

and 15% for other Indian schemes (5).

The Council announced that the rent increases were to be applied from 1 February 1981 following a four-month moratorium.

In Phoenix, the Phoenix Working Committee (PWC) held a series of "house, zonal and area cell gatherings" prior to calling a public meeting to discuss action (6). Mr R Chetty, a member of the PWC outlined some of the actions contemplated. "There may be a total boycott of rentals (the residents will not pay their rents at all), there may be a partial boycott (residents will pay how much they want), mass meetings may be staged and administrative work at the rent office in Stonebridge may be disrupted (7)."

A "snap survey (8)" conducted by the Phoenix Rent Action Committee (PRAC) revealed that "seventy percent of Phoenix's 63000 residents (9)" would support a rent boycott as protest against the rent increases. Furthermore, 20% of residents canvassed would consider withholding their rent payments for a specific period while the remaining 10% were undecided, but in the opinion of PRAC official Jack Singh, likely to support "the actions of the majority (10)."

Mr Virgile Bonhomme a committee member of the Durban Housing Action Committee (DHAC) warned the Durban City Council that unless the rent increases were reviewed tenants in Newlands East, Phoenix, Sydenham Heights and Chatsworth would conduct a rent boycott (11). This statement was supported by Mr Jackie Nair of PRAC, who gave 1 March as the deadline (12).

In Phoenix, organizers of PRAC and the PWC collected the rent

slips from 2000 tenants in a door-to-door campaign. There was no compulsion reported Mr Jackie Nair, the chairman of PRAC. "However I would advise them (the tenants) to cooperate with our members when they do come round, as we are working in their interests (13)."

As the rent boycott gathered momentum, Mayor Hotz sternly warned the rent-boycotters that they faced eviction. "She said the City Council, like any other business is obliged to go through certain procedures (14)."

Mr Jackie Nair of PRAC responded: "We are not alone. The churches, trade unions and other communities are all watching. Many of them have told us, 'If they touch you, they are touching the entire black community (15).'"

Protest against the rent increases gathered powerful support. At a meeting in Newlands East, Archbishop D.E. Hurley spoke against the rent increases, castigating the "system which oppressed people in this country (16)."

Speaking at the same meeting, Mr Virgile Bonhomme rejected accusations of intimidation by his organization of non-participants in the rent boycott. He "called upon the Mayor, Mrs Sybil Hotz to convene a meeting within 14 days to explain the council's policy and listen to the views of the people (17)."

Mr Bonhomme urged the 700 people present (18,19) to ignore the "threats of eviction and electricity cuts (20)" made by the City Council. "He went on to say that they (NERA) had

collected hundreds of rent slips already. 'Let me make it quite clear, ladies and gentlemen, the rent slips were not taken away from the residents, the residents came forward and handed them over (21).'"

Meanwhile, surveys conducted by PRAC and the Newlands East Residents' Committee (NERC) revealed that 44,4% of the 7800 residents lived below the Household Subsistence Level. In Newlands East, 47,5% of the 1800 families were in a similar state of economic crisis (22).

These data came from a memorandum from DHAC submitted to the Durban City Council (23). Based on sample sizes of 4,64% (243 cases) for Phoenix and 9,59% (139 cases) for Newlands East, the socio-economic surveys revealed further that in Phoenix over 20% of the heads of households interviewed paid more than 50% of their income in rent. The comparative datum for Newlands East was 16%.

In Phoenix (24), where the mean size of households was 5,47 persons, the budgetary allocations were these:

Food:	40,2%
Clothing:	14,0%
Individual cleansing:	1,2%
Household cleansing:	2,2%
Workers' transport:	10,9%

Water, fuel & light: 8,0%

Rent: 23,5%

Comparative data for Newlands East (25), where the mean household size was 5,41 persons, follow:

Food: 38,5%

Clothing: 10,8%

Individual cleansing: 1,0%

Household cleansing: 2,2%

Workers' transport: 11,7%

Water, fuel & light: 8,0%

Rent: 27,8%

Methodological criticisms and issues regarding definitions were made by the City Treasurer in response to the survey data cited above (26). These comments, plus a detailed analysis of the DHAC - City Treasurer memoranda are to be discussed elsewhere (27).

A DHAC survey conducted in Newlands East revealed that only 10% of those canvassed opposed the rent boycott, while 80% had not paid their rent. Furthermore, no persons interviewed had joined the action because of external pressure. Mr Virgile Bonhomme claimed that "nearly 100000 residents" were participating, and that many more would join if evictions occurred (28).

A united front of 29 sporting, welfare, community and educational organizations was convened to support the rent boycott. These were the South African Council for Sport, Federation Professional League, Natal Council of Sport, Black Sash, Democratic Lawyers' Association, Health Workers' Association, Cato Manor Ratepayers' Association, Southern Durban Rates Action Committee, Chatsworth Housing Action Committee, University of Natal (Durban) SRC, Reservoir Hills Ratepayers' Association, Natal Indian Congress, Stanger Civic Association, University of Durban-Westville SRC, Southern Durban Civic Federation, Durban Child Welfare Society, Asherville Housing Action Committee, Natal Rates Working Committee, Natal Indian Cane Growers' Association, Tongaat Civic Association, La Mercy Ratepayers' Association, Anti-South African Indian Council Committee, Democratic Teachers' Society, Medical School SRC, Natal University Black Students' Society, Merewent Ratepayers' Association and Diakonia.

The meeting decided that rents should be determined by what tenants could afford. In addition, the meeting rejected claims that Newlands East non-participants in the rent boycott had been threatened and intimidated (29). Claims by certain City Councillors that "agitators" were coercing participation in the rent boycott were vigorously rejected by Mr Virgile Bonhomme (30).

With no sign of concession from the City Council, public meetings in the affected townships voted to continue the rent boycott into April. The possible consequences were to have electricity and water supplies cut off (31). A signature-gathering campaign organized by University of Natal (Durban) students and the Black Sash, presented the Mayor Mrs Hotz with a petition from 260 White voters calling for a public meeting to declare the Council's policy for the resolution of the rent crisis (32).

The Working Committee for the Amelioration of Conditions in the City Council's Housing Schemes, chaired by PFP Councillor Margaret Ambler and set up by the Health & Housing Committee proposed that a RIM subsidy be provided for Durban housing. Right-wing Councillors attacked the idea. Councillor Gys Muller said: "It will have the people of Durban up in arms. Rent boycotters should be kicked out (33)." Councillor Muller's comments provoked a vigorous editorial in The Graphic (34), which reviewed the history of "anti-Indian agitation" by local politicians of the recent past. Arguing that the City Council and the Government were the cause of the housing and rental crisis, the editorial demanded that rentals and mortgage repayments in the boycotting areas be fixed at 12 1/2% of the occupiers' monthly incomes: "The solution is radical but reasonable. The White people of Durban and the Government have caused the problem. They must

pay for it (35)."

At a meeting of the Management Committee of the Durban City Council, figures provided by the City Treasurer's Department showed an increase in rent arrears in the organized townships. However the figure of 80% participation claimed by the rent boycott organizers was disputed. In Phoenix 1862 of the 8441 tenants defaulted on their February rentals; in March, 2294 of the then 8726 tenants did not pay. (The difference in totals was created by new tenants moving in to Phoenix in March.) In Newlands East, 394 of the 1866 tenants defaulted in February and 686 in March. In Sydenham Heights - a Council flat development - 71 out of 360 were in rent arrears for February and 222 in March (36).

Reduced to percentages, the rent boycott participation figures are these:

Newlands East: February 1981: 21,11%
 March 1981 : 36,76%

Phoenix: February 1981: 22,06%
 March 1981 : 26,30%

Sydenham Heights: February 1981: 19,72%
 March 1981 : 61,67%

These data fueled anti-DHAC sentiments amongst certain Councillors, with Management Committee chairperson Councillor Neil McLennan calling the 80% participation claim "utterly ridiculous" and accusing the rent boycott organizers of appearing "to be unaware of what's happening in the areas they claim to represent (37)."

On 11 April 1981, the Council disconnected the electrical supplies of 65 Coloured and Indian tenants. Many of these were participants in the rent boycott. Deputy City Treasurer Wilfred Stone stated that the disconnection was normal practice when arrears had reached a specific level and had nothing to do with the rent boycott. Reaction by the organizers of the rent boycott was to distribute 10000 handbills calling upon the residents of Newlands East and Phoenix to show solidarity with the rent boycott by switching off their lights between 8 and 10 pm (38).

"Candlelight Night" was regarded as a success. All lights were off in Sydenham Heights flat development (where the Mayor Mrs Sybil Hotz was burnt in effigy), all but 8 families in Newlands East were in darkness and about 70% of Phoenix homes took part in the blackout. This was considered to be a refutation of the Council's questioning DHAC's representativeness (39).

After six weeks, the rent boycott began to wane. "Resistance

campaigns" were launched to give new impetus to the faltering boycott. Mr Virgile Bonhomme stated that DHAC had received assurances from 250 people in Newlands East, 100 in Sydenham Heights and "about 400" in Phoenix that they would make themselves liable to eviction by not paying rent for the three months of February, March and April (40).

On 16 April the rent boycott was over. A spokesperson for the Phoenix Rent Action Committee stated that the electricity disconnections had stopped the boycott (41).

DISCUSSION

This analysis of the rent boycott is restricted to a discussion of tactical and community organization errors.

The organizers made four tactical errors. These inhibited either the progress of the action, the development of a democratic community structure or both. The first error was to allow the rent boycott to continue well into injury time. The sense of defeat that followed the slow fizzle as the boycott faded served to reinforce the entrenched sense of powerlessness experienced by many working people within the communities concerned. Furthermore, it is possible that the credibility of the organizers in their roles as community leaders was damaged by this. Those who suffered from electricity discontinuance and eviction might have been

enriched by their martyrdom; however this is a moot point. The tendency to reify martyrdom and suffering serves only to obscure the real effects of struggle. A more useful strategy might have been to limit the boycott to one month. The numbers who chose to engage in the campaign of passive resistance would have been much larger, and thus a greater indication of solidarity and mobilization.

Secondly, obtaining "mandates" from public meetings is a dubious form of democratic practice. On one hand, the numbers present can seldom if ever form a simple majority of the community as a whole. On the other, intentionally or otherwise, the public nature of voting (by show of hands) is inevitably coercive and can never equal the freedom of choice offered by the secret ballot. No doubt a ballot is more demanding of time and effort. However responsible trade unions use the ballot and community organizations can learn from the trade union example. Thus the only claim that can be made of a public meeting is that it reveals trends of thought and opinion within the community as a whole. Mandates come from majorities alone.

Thirdly, DHAC and its spokespersons made claims (such as the 80% participation) that were easy for their opponents to dismiss (36). This is possibly the consequence of conflating majorities at public meetings with the majority of the community or communities concerned.

21 Post, *ibid.*

Finally the tactic of collecting rent slips from tenants was a major error. To unsophisticated persons this could have been seen to be coercive. More damagingly, to hostile elements in the Press and elsewhere, this action provided all the "evidence" they needed of "agitators" and "intimidation".

24 Table 8, Appendix 8, Appendixes to Addendum submitted by

REFERENCES AND FOOTNOTES

1 For example, the *Newlands East Self-Survey of Needs (NESSON)*. Arising directly in the aftermath of the rent boycott of 1981, The NESSON programme had these goals:

Firstly, to obtain empirical data, in terms of the residents' *umwelt*, of the needs and presenting problems of the community.

Secondly, by transferring survey expertise to the people, to provide them with a valuable tool for mobilization and social action.

Thirdly, to provide a fundamental level of community organization by way of the infrastructure of the surveys.

27 Baschin, David; Aronides and Mollie Cohen Durbin City Council, 29 September 1980.

2 *Natal Mercury*, 25 March 1980.

3 *Natal Mercury*, *ibid.*

4 *Natal Mercury*, 27 March 1980.

5 *Natal Mercury*, 9 April 1980.

6 *Post*, 14 January 1981.

7 *Post*, *ibid.*

8 *Post*, 18 January 1981.

9 *Post*, *ibid.*

10 *Post*, *ibid.*

11 *Daily News*, 9 February 1981.

12 *Natal Mercury*, 17 February 1981.

13 *Post*, 3 March 1981.

14 *Post*, 11 March 1981.

15 *Post*, *ibid.*

16 *Natal Mercury*, 13 March 1981.

17 *Daily News*, 13 March 1981.

18 *Daily News*, *ibid.*

19 *Natal Mercury*, *ibid.*

20 *Post*, 18 March 1981.

21 Post, *ibid*.

22 Sunday Tribune, 15 March 1981.

23 12 September 1980.

24 Table 8, Appendix 8, *Appendixes to Addendum submitted by the Durban Housing Action Committee to the Durban City Council*, 29 September 1980.

25 Table 8, Appendix 17, *ibid*.

26 Adjustment of rentals in municipal housing projects, Annexure 3: Subsistence level, City Treasurer's Department, Durban: 2 October 1980.

27 Basckin, David: *Avalanches and Healie Cobs: Durban City Council and Durban Housing Action Group memoranda on the 1981 Rent Boycott*, in preparation.

28 Daily News, 19 March 1981.

29 Natal Mercury, 21 March 1981.

30 Sunday Tribune, 22 March 1981.

31 Daily News, 26 March 1981.

32 *Sunday Tribune*, 29 March 1981.

33 *Natal Mercury*, 28 March 1981.

34 *The Graphic*, 3 April 1981.

35 *The Graphic*, *ibid.*

36 *Natal Mercury*, 3 April 1981.

37 *Natal Mercury*, *ibid.*

38 *Natal Mercury*, 10 April 1981.

39 *Sunday Tribune*, 12 April 1981.

40 *Sunday Tribune*, *ibid.*

41 *Natal Mercury*, 16 April 1981.

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