

'SIDLA EKHAYA: WE SHALL EAT AT HOME': THE PIETERMARITZBURG DETAINEES' HUNGER STRIKE OF 1989

by Christopher Merrett

PRISON hunger strikes evoke images of Suffragettes or the Northern Ireland troubles, but just over 30 years ago, in a largely forgotten episode, Pietermaritzburg experienced its own. The strikers were State of Emergency detainees held without charge, trial or any access to the courts; in effect prisoners of a police state able to hold them indefinitely and subject only to the annual renewal of the Emergency.¹ The police had the power to move them at will and interrogate them. Emergency regulations imposed very tight controls over visiting rights, correspondence, reading and study material, exercise, medical treatment, and access to money and purchases. There was also a detailed punishment regime; but plentiful evidence that in practice regulations in general were subordinated to the whims of security branch police and prison warders. The legal liability of the State and its agents was limited, severely restricting the possibility of criminal or civil action against them.

From 12 June 1986, over 2000 people were held under such conditions in the Natal Midlands, almost all of them aligned with the United Democratic Front (UDF) or the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU); and politically opposed to the State and its ally, Inkatha. From late 1987 numbers mounted significantly, lengths of detention increased, and conditions in prison deteriorated.² Probably less than 20% of detainees were ever charged and only a minuscule proportion of them convicted, in part because this was not the aim of the authorities.

Detention was preventative and interrogative, and detainees had little hope of redress in the courts. In general, there was a sense among the detained that in any case release meant transfer from a conventional prison to an even larger one.

Medical care was very basic, with Panado a universal panacea, and unavailable at night. Prison doctors determined whether there should be access to outside medical opinion. The regulations for detainees allowed for an hour's exercise per day, but this was often cut to 15 minutes without exposure to sunlight. Visits were limited to one person each fortnight and children were not allowed. Punishment, often arbitrary, ranged from petty harassment to beating, tear gassing, and saturation of bedding. There is evidence that conditions worsened in the second half of 1988; and on one occasion teargas was used on a group of Wilgefontein detainees in their cells after interrogation. Three detainees were shackled hand and foot for over four weeks in October and November 1988 after a dispute over food.

Some detainees had been badly assaulted and tortured by police, and put under pressure to become informers. The longevity, arbitrary nature and uncertainty of detention created a major psychological problem: as one detainee put it, 'The banging of doors, the clattering of keys raise your hopes about release and going home'. The food was generally described as bad: white porridge, samp (coarse maize meal) without salt, and

mealie-rice. Sometimes there were boiled beans and carrots with pork fat and everything had to be eaten with a spoon. In typical prison fashion meal times, except breakfast, were unnaturally early leaving detainees for twelve hours without food.

During 1988, seventeen hunger strikes involving 500 detainees were recorded nationally (and there were probably more), including a three-day protest in Pietermaritzburg in November over food and general conditions. But the strike began in earnest in Johannesburg in January 1989 as a last-ditch attempt by long-term detainees, some held for over 1 000 days, to secure their release. It was explained at the time as a form of empowerment to counter the helplessness and trauma suffered as a result of indefinite imprisonment. Detainees suffered from the DDD syndrome – debility, dependence and dread – and a general sense of dehumanisation.

In mid-December 1988 one Pietermaritzburg detainee was placed in solitary for refusing to stand for a warder and for possessing a list of detainees, and went on a six-day hunger strike. There was a three-day preliminary strike at New Prison, Pietermaritzburg in early January 1989 to protest about abusive warders and late delivery of food orders. Detainees gained an impression of impending release from security branch police after a meeting with a delegation of five 'strong comrades', but when nothing transpired frustration set in among an increasingly depressed collection of long-term prisoners, many in need of psychological help. Someone suggested donating blood to victims of violence (and accidents in general)

to publicise their plight, but instead on 18 February 1989 a hunger strike was started by 100 Pietermaritzburg detainees.³

This was several weeks after the beginning on 23 January of the national strike,⁴ which had become an international scandal, the West Germans submitting a *démarche* to the South African government. Minister of Law and Order Adriaan Vlok, after a visit by a delegation from the South African Council of Churches, undertook to review the case of each striker, so the local strike started just as the countrywide campaign was suspended on 15 February.

The Pietermaritzburg strike would last nineteen days, but it was accepted from the outset that not everyone would hold out. After four days some strikers had lost up to 3 kilogrammes, their only nourishment being water. By international standards this was accelerated deterioration, possibly due to socio-economic background or poor prison diet.⁵ The prison authorities left the lights on, banned the radio, and stopped family visits. By the sixth day detainees reported dizziness, headaches, joint problems, difficulty in urinating, and feeling 'very, very weak'; one significantly reporting 'the first tough time of my life'. The number of strikers was down to 40.⁶ Their lawyers faxed Vlok about the crisis, but received no reply.

On day eight the authorities dispersed the strikers to police stations in the Midlands to isolate them: Boston, Dalton, Howick, Mid-Illovo, Mooi River, Muden and Richmond. This had no result except to complicate the lives of the strikers' lawyers, who now had to cover considerable distances: Muden, for instance, is 100 kilometres from

Pietermaritzburg, and Mooi River 60. By day ten, it was necessary to admit seven strikers to hospital, including S'khumbuzo Ngwenya Mbatha, local United Democratic Front secretary, who had been transferred to Boston, where on day eight he had stomach cramps and had to crawl to a bucket of water. When he stood up, he fainted. By chance, his mother saw him at Edendale Hospital and reported: 'He is very thin. His eyes are inside his head. He looked very weak and at first he did not recognise me.'⁷ In all, 35 strikers would be hospitalised.⁸ In some of Pietermaritzburg's hospitals security was lax and strikers received visitors, but this was not true outside the city.

Ten days into the local strike on 28 February, representatives of the Ad-Hoc Hunger Strike Support Committee met their counterparts from other regions and concluded that the government could not afford a detainee death from starvation. By day fifteen the Pietermaritzburg branch of the Medical Association of South Africa expressed alarm. Doctors and families persuaded strikers to accept drips containing glucose, dextrose, electrolytes and vitamins. And it was suspected that the security police, witnessing rapid physical deterioration and fearing deaths, were keen to resolve the situation, although they would not commit to specific release dates.

On 7 March, two lawyers representing Pietermaritzburg's hunger strikers spent over four hours with Vlok in Cape Town. After consideration of each case they came away with assurances that all detainees would be charged or released. On this basis, from midday on 8 March strikers resumed eating. Most were released, after a three-day obser-

vation and rehydration period, by 15 March. Medical advice recommended soft, easily digested food with vitamin supplements to avoid atrophy of the intestinal wall – but Kentucky Fried Chicken proved more popular.

Pietermaritzburg continued to be out of step: the suspended national strike was about to be resumed as only 200 of 900 known detainees had yet been released. By 16 March, there were 85 detainees back on hunger strike nationally including Sandile Thusi, a Durban detainee originally held in Pietermaritzburg.

The Minister of Law and Order found it expedient to suggest that hunger strikes were orchestrated from outside prison and used language reminiscent of preludes to organisational restrictions in the past. This had minimal effect and during the strikes, national and local, there was strong solidarity activity in Pietermaritzburg. Lawyers for Human Rights and the National Association of Democratic Lawyers organised a meeting as early as 10 February and a 48-hour sympathy fast with the national hunger strikers had begun on 15 February, together with an inter-denominational service two days later under the auspices of the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness. Some local student leaders, including the Student Representative Council president, extended this fast to eight days ending with a vigil and prayer service on 23 February, well into the Pietermaritzburg strike action.

The Ad-Hoc Hunger Strike Support Committee gave assistance to lawyers, who found themselves in an awkward position – caught between strikers, families and police, particularly after the detainees were dispersed. Towards

the strike's end, the city's mayor met security branch police, the Chamber of Commerce was voicing concern, and prominent citizens were on a roster of 24-hour fasts. On 12 March, National Detainees' Day, and after the end of the Pietermaritzburg strike, a well-attended service was held at the Metropolitan Methodist Church.

The Ad-Hoc Hunger Strike Support Committee worked quietly in the background. Its activities included two placard stands (in the fashion of the Black Sash), an inter-faith service, and the placing of two large advertisements in the city's newspaper (figure 1).⁹ The Detainees Aid Committee (formerly the Detainees Support Committee or DESCOM until it was restricted in February 1988) placed a daily block in the *Natal Witness* recording the passage of days up to the end of the strike – when the public was asked to 'Remember the 35 hunger strikers as they recover from their fasting' (figure 2).¹⁰ DACOM also arranged two of its traditional tea parties for relatives and friends of hunger-striking detainees; and when they were hospitalised provided toiletries, pyjamas and pocket money. For 30 months DESCOM/DACOM had battled alone to support detainees and their families in a variety of ways, but it took the hunger strike to capture broader public imagination and support.

In the main the Minister of Law and Order honoured his agreement (one striker released only in April seemed to have been victim of bureaucratic bungling), releasing the majority of strikers (23) without charge, although under Emergency restrictions. These were fairly standard, confining individuals to the magisterial district with a daily report at a police station;

and exclusion from any meeting discussing politics including boycott campaigns. The daily report to a police station created vulnerability and marked out ex-detainees as targets for Inkatha. One ex-detainee travelling to report was killed in a car crash. Restrictions were simply ignored from mid-year when the defiance campaign got underway. Lucky Blose appeared in court on 15 March in connection with two deaths in the Henley/Taylors Halt area in late 1987, but was released on R500 bail. Charges were later withdrawn. Five hunger strikers were among a group of thirteen people charged at Camperdown magistrate's court with illegal gathering and possession of firearms, but the case was dropped in June 1990.

On 1 April 1989, a third local hunger strike started at New Prison among six remaining detainees. They were moved in two groups to Pelonomi Hospital in Bloemfontein and then released in mid-April and early May. This was repeated on 21 June under the renewed State of Emergency (the sixth in South Africa's history) with two more strikers moved to Pelonomi before release on 30 June.

In the 1960s, a six-day hunger strike had taken place on Robben Island: Indres Naidoo recalled that 'somehow the atmosphere on the Island was never exactly the same as it had been before' and conditions improved.¹¹ So it was for Pietermaritzburg's detainees in February 1989. The government could not afford a hunger-strike death; and wide community support for the strikers surprised and embarrassed the local securocrats. The number of people detained in Pietermaritzburg declined remarkably after the strike, even though violence reached new

heights in March 1990 in the Seven Day War. Mass and long-term detention without trial were at an end.

Minister Vlok continued to peddle his version of history, claiming in March 1990 that only those advocating violence had ever been detained.¹² Clearly, with a low-key but vicious civil war taking place around Pietermaritzburg, his tactics had

changed radically.¹³ Detention during the Emergency had been, far from an impartial policing matter, one of crude politics.

The hunger strike is thought to have had other effects. It played a part in encouraging the defiance campaign. And it showed that given discipline and conviction the seemingly powerless could exert influence, although they

JOINT STATEMENT OF CONCERNED ORGANISATIONS IN PIETERMARITZBURG

- 1) We are aware of the National Hunger Strike by detainees in prisons throughout the country.
- 2) Detention without trial 'under the various repressive measures enforced by the South African Government means the following:
 - i) No access to courts of law;
 - ii) Uncertainty as to detainees' whereabouts;
 - iii) Uncertainty as to detainees' physical and mental well-being;
 - iv) Uncertainty as to the reasons and period of detention;
 - v) Restricted contact with families and lawyers;
 - vi) Unnecessary anguish for detainees and their loved ones.
- 3) We are aware that more than one hundred people are in detention in and around Pietermaritzburg, some of whom have been held for periods in excess of one year.
- 4) We realise that a Hunger Strike is a desperate and courageous measure by which detainees risk their lives as they have been left with no other method of drawing attention to their plight.
- 5) We are deeply concerned about the critical condition of these detainees as well as their continued detention.

We are deeply dismayed at the response of the authorities. In order to impress upon them the seriousness with which we view the situation, some of our members yesterday embarked on a fast for a period of forty eight hours.

The fast will end with an inter-faith prayer service at 6 pm on Friday 17th February, 1989.

WE INVITE ALL CONCERNED PEOPLE TO JOIN US IN OUR FAST

inserted by

LAWYERS FOR DEMOCRACY	BLACK SASH
LAWYERS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS	PIETERMARITZBURG COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
N.A.D.E.L.	FIVE FREEDOMS FORUM
PASCA	NORTHERN NATAL SOCCER BOARD
DACOM	PRECOS
NATAL INDIAN CONGRESS	M.D.C.U.
PIETERMARITZBURG DEMOCRATIC ASSOCIATION	MUSLIM STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION
ORGANISATION FOR APPROPRIATE SOCIAL SERVICES IN S.A.	ILM (KNOWLEDGE)
JOINT ACADEMIC STAFF ASSOCIATION	PIETERMARITZBURG COMBINED RATEPAYERS' AND RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION
VEDA DHARMA SABHA AND YOUTH GROUP	NAMDA
STANDING FOR THE TRUTH	M.F.A.
	AFRA, LDA

Figure 1: Advertisement from the Natal Witness, 16 February 1989

had to threaten to starve themselves to death. As the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (Dublin) put it, 'A hunger strike may be one of the few possibilities of making a personally significant statement in a situation of powerlessness' and it carries a strong image of commitment and sacrifice.¹⁴ In spite of government antagonism, human rights groups showed durability and an ability to work together constructively with lawyers and doctors committed to the rule of law. And, ultimately, the strike showed the futility and weakness of using authoritarian measures that were fundamentally unjust and pricked the consciences even of some conservatives. After three years, detention without trial had become a political liability.

NOTES

- 1 Under the Public Safety Act (3 of 1953), s.3(3) of the Security Emergency regulations, gazetted each year in June, 1986–1989.
- 2 The history of Emergency detention in the Natal Midlands may be found in *Detention under Three Emergencies: A Report on the Natal Midlands, 1986–1989* (Pietermaritzburg, Detainees Aid Committee, 1989); and Christopher Merrett, 'Emergency of the state: detention without trial in Pietermaritzburg and the Natal Midlands, 1986–90' *Natalia* 41 (2011), pp. 10–33.
- 3 The details were captured by the Detainees Aid Committee in *Sidla Ekhaya: We Shall Eat at Home* (Pietermaritzburg, DACOM, 1990) based on a number of sources including Rishi Thakurdin, 'Sidla ekhaya: we shall eat at home: report on the hunger strike, Pietermaritzburg' (unpublished report produced for DACOM). Hunger strikers were not identified, except where named in the press.
- 4 Max Coleman, *A Crime against Humanity: Analysing the Repression of the Apartheid State* (Johannesburg, Human Rights



Figure 2: Advertisements from the Natal Witness

- Committee; Cape Town, Mayibuye Books; and Cape Town, David Philip, 1998), pp. 140–141; David Webster and Maggie Friedman, 'Repression and the State of Emergency: June 1987–March 1989' *South African Review* 5 (1989), p. 40. For general contemporary material see 'Detentions and hunger strikes' *Critical Health* 26 (May 1989). For the history of detention without trial see *Torture is Part of the System: State Violence in South Africa and Namibia* (London, African National Congress, 1984); Don Foster, Dennis Davis and Diane Sandler, *Detention and Torture in South Africa: Psychological, Legal and Historical Studies* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1987).
- 5 Voluntary total fasting is generally expected to result in a first week weight loss of 3–4 kg, then 300 grams per day. Hunger disappears after about four days. With 10% loss, hospitalisation is necessary. For two days there is carbohydrate depletion, then the body breaks down the fat store. After four weeks it has to rely on protein, which causes muscle wastage and brain damage. Initially, lethargy, lack of concentration, sleepiness, headaches, abdominal cramps, bleeding gums, blood in the urine, and respiratory and skin problems are indications of vitamin deficiency. After 30 days brain dysfunction results from lack of vitamin B with a low pulse, poor circulation and heart trouble. The final stage is a coma with death following any time after 40 days ('Voluntary total fasting', [Johannesburg], Health Crisis Committee, 25 February 1989). Bobby Sands, the IRA prisoner, died on 5 May 1981 after 66 days on hunger strike, for example.
 - 6 *Natal Witness* (NW), 24 February 1989.
 - 7 NW, 28 February 1989.
 - 8 The hospitals were Northdale, Grey's, Midlands Medi Clinic and Edendale in Pietermaritzburg; and Greytown and Estcourt.
 - 9 NW, 16 February and 10 March 1989 (as part of the national solidarity campaign).
 - 10 NW, 10 March 1989.
 - 11 Indres Naidoo with Albie Sachs, *Island in Chains: Ten Years on Robben Island by Prisoner 885/63* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982).
 - 12 NW, 22 March 1990.
 - 13 For general coverage of the Seven Day War see Lou Levine (ed.), *Faith in Turmoil: The Seven Days War* (Pietermaritzburg, PACSA, 1999).
 - 14 Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (Dublin) to the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference, fax, 15 February 1989.