

Rent Boycotts

Local Authorities on their knees

Since September 1984, there have been at least 49 rent boycotts in South Africa's black townships. These have cost local authorities more than R250-million, and led to the collapse of black local government. KAREN JOCHELSON co-ordinated an investigation into the origins and nature of these boycotts.

'An eviction to one is an eviction to all' is the new township slogan as residents' refusal to pay rent hardens.

The rent boycott in many South African townships is in truth a boycott of service charges for maintenance and installation of amenities such as water, sewerage, and roads. Actual rent tariffs for houses are very low.

Boycotting residents have rejected exorbitant service charges which have not been invested in necessary township development. Many complain that they are charged for services which do not exist.

Rent boycotts and demands across the country seem uniform. But they mask vastly different realities. In each township the immediate reason for the boycott, those involved and the nature of organisation, create specific patterns.

The current wave of rent boycotts began during September 1984 in the Vaal townships of Sebokeng, Sharpeville, Bophelong, Boipatong, Zamdela and Evaton.

During the first half of 1985 the boycott spread to towns in the northern Orange Free State, such as Tumahole, Vredefort, and Kroonstad.

Since May this year a second wave of rent boycotts have developed in Soweto, the Eastern Cape, and East Rand townships like Katlehong, Duduza, Tsakane and Tembisa.

Forty-nine rent boycotts have been recorded nationally. According to conservative estimates these have cost the state R250-million since 1984.

The rent boycotts of 1984 and 1985 were largely a response to massive rent hikes imposed by the Lekoa Town Council. Unemployment and declining real wages meant households were spending more on basic essentials and could not afford

higher rents.

In 1978 the Vaal Triangle Community Council introduced its 'economic rentals' policy. Costs of housing provision, municipal services and administration were to be covered by rents, which rose dramatically.

Residents called for reduced rents, and also demanded that members of the council, which had lost all remaining legitimacy, resign.

Election promises were not kept, and many councillors were suspected of corruption and maladministration. When residents' delegations tried to discuss grievances with the council, they were ignored.

The first boycotts were concerned with economic matters. But this soon broadened into a strategy for destroying the economic base of the unpopular black local authorities.

Rent boycotts tend to gather momentum. Most households do not save unpaid rent, and use it for daily expenses. Arrears escalate over the months and it is unlikely that a boycotting household will ever be able to pay off its debt. Since significant proportions of a community boycott rent payments, it is difficult for the state to undertake legal or intimidatory action with any effect.

Town councils have adopted similar strategies to combat boycotts. The Lekoa Council and Orange Vaal Development Board issued summonses to Vaal and Tumahole defaulters, giving them three days to defend the action. Most residents ignored the summonses, often because they did not understand them, and failed to appear in court. Courts issued default judgements, compelling debtors to pay rent arrears or be evicted.

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Then the board issued notices under section 65 of the Housing Act. This allowed the council either to take legal action, or to evict defaulters with seven days notice. The council followed the first, less risky step.

Again, many residents ignored the notices and failed to appear in court. Warrants of arrest were issued for contempt of court. Many were forced to work off jail sentences over weekends.

The councils have used the state of emergency and consequent disorganisation to try to crush the boycotts. Councils also hope evictions will intimidate residents sufficiently to break the boycott.

The Soweto Council followed the Vaal and tried to crush the Soweto rent boycott through evictions before arrears became too high. It has had little success and merely increased resistance.

Evictions have occurred on a limited scale. Wider action could provoke resistance far greater than the Soweto Council recently confronted in White City when police broke up a meeting to protest the eviction of rent defaulters.

The Lekoa Council's public policy is to evict families with breadwinners in stable employment first, as they can supposedly afford rent and arrears.

Losing a home is a serious threat given the housing shortage. So evictions or the threat of eviction may create splits in communities between those who can afford to pay debts and rent and those who cannot. But this has not occurred on any great scale.

Boycott breakers may have their houses burnt down. During August 1986 an evicted Tumahole resident agreed to pay his arrears so he could be reinstated. The day after he moved back into his house, it was set on fire.

Councils are in a no-win situation. Mass evictions may provoke fierce resistance from residents. Yet they cannot admit defeat and write off rent arrears, losing necessary income. So far 32 community councils and three town councils have collapsed due to rent boycotts. Future events will be a test of strength between communities and councils.

Defiant Vaal Boycott Enters Third Year

Solidarity among Vaal township residents makes it unlikely that the two-year rent boycott will be broken by evictions. If the Lekoa Town Council intends to end the boycott by force, it may provoke further resistance and a possible repetition of the September 1984 uprising.

After the recent White City massacre in Soweto, the Lekoa Council would be shortsighted if it believed that crushing the rent boycott is possible at present.

THE 1984 RENT HIKE

Resistance in the Vaal townships was not always fierce. Before September 1984, the Department of Co-operation and Development considered black local government in the Vaal to be the most successful in the country. Vaal townships were not particularly active in the events of 1976 and the Vaal Triangle Community Council (VTCC) seemed to have more support than most. In

February 1978 it was the first to receive formal administrative powers under the Community Councils Act.

Similarly, the Lekoa Town Council (LTC), which replaced the VTCC in January 1984, was the first black town council in the country. It was elected in November 1983 on a 14,7% poll. This was substantially less than the 20% the council managed in 1978 but well above the national average.

Surprisingly, Vaal local authorities ran at a profit. Throughout its existence, the VTCC managed to balance its books and still subsidise Orange-Vaal Administration Board projects in the Free State and QwaQwa.

Its 'economic rentals' policy made this possible and the seven years prior to 1984 saw dramatic increases in Vaal rents. In 1977 average Vaal rents were R11,87 per month; by the start of 1984 they were R62,56 - more than R10 higher than anywhere else in the country.

At a meeting on 29 June 1984 the LTC decided to increase monthly rents by R5,90 for board houses and R5,50 for private houses. The LTC maintained Vaal residents were the best paid in the

country and could afford higher rents. Throughout the rent boycott the authorities stood by this claim. It is simply not true.

A 1985 Bureau of Market Research report showed average annual black per capita incomes in the Vaal Triangle were substantially below the national metropolitan average - R1 112,79 versus R1 366,24 in 1983; R1 159,82 versus R1 396,48 in 1985. While the real increase in black incomes between 1980 and 1985 was 17%, rent increased by 56%.

against the increase, distributed pamphlets in the townships and held meetings in Zone 13 Sebokeng on 25 August, and in Bophelong, Boipatong and Evaton Small Farms (adjacent to Zone 7) on 26 August.

The Sebokeng gathering called a further meeting for Monday 3 September at the Roman Catholic Church in Small Farms, from where people would march to the administration offices to express their dissatisfaction.

In Sharpeville, the Sharpeville Anti-Rent Committee organised opposition.



Vaal residents demanded rent be reduced to R30 during negotiations

Announcement of the rent increase was delayed so that individual councillors could break the news to their wards first. In most cases this did not happen and when a general announcement of the increase was made in late July residents and local organisations responded angrily.

THE MARCH ON SEBOKENG

Outside Sharpeville, the Vaal Civic Association (VCA), a UDF affiliate, co-ordinated opposition to the rent increase. Launched in October 1983, its major campaign before the rent hike involved opposition to the November black local authorities elections.

When rent increases were announced in July, the VCA organised an anti-rent campaign. It issued press statements

Most leaders of this ad hoc body were linked to black-consciousness trade unions and political organisations.

The Anti-Rent Committee held four meetings at the Sharpeville Anglican Church on successive Sundays, from 12 August until 2 September. At the last of these, it was decided to march on Sebokeng the next day, and join up with the anti-rent protest at the administration offices.

The council ignored all demands for a suspension of the rent increase. Its only response was to call a meeting with Vaal church leaders, warning that their site permits would be withdrawn if they continued to allow churches to be used for political meetings.

In Bophelong, residents had an additional grievance. In August they had to pay a R50 deposit to cover future arrears on electricity accounts. A meeting to discuss the issue on 29 August was attended by hundreds of

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angry Bophelong residents and a number of councillors. All council members present were armed. The mayor, Mahlatsi and deputy mayor, Dlamini, had two guns each.

The mayor addressed the rowdy meeting, and residents insisted that he answer questions about the rent increase and the electricity deposit. At that point the hall lights were switched off, councillors were given a police escort out and teargas was fired into the hall.

That night police shot at youths in the township, and for the rest of the week there were sporadic clashes between Bophelong residents and police. These culminated on the night of 2 September when three youths were killed.

The following morning a strong police presence in Sharpeville and Boipatong prevented marchers from leaving for Sebokeng. Several protestors were killed in clashes with police, and in Sharpeville a crowd attacked and killed Deputy-mayor Dlamini.

A march set off from Small Farms, but never reached the administration offices. Details of events en route to the offices are sub judice, pending the outcome of the Delmas treason trial. However, during the morning, large-scale violence broke out in Sebokeng and Evaton. Two Lekoa councillors, an Evaton councillor and numbers of protestors were killed.

THE CONFLICT ESCALATES

Violent confrontations continued for the next few days. All over the Vaal administration buildings, beerhalls and homes and businesses of councillors and policemen were attacked. Thousands were arrested. Police raided Vaal hospitals, arresting those with bullet wounds. Fearing arrest, unrest victims stopped going to hospital and the death toll rose. By 9 September more than forty people had been killed, about 90% of them by police.

After 3 September, almost all of those associated with organising the rent protest were arrested or went into hiding away from the Vaal. Most remained outside the Vaal well into 1986.

While the VCA and Sharpeville Anti-Rent Committee could not act, the Vaal Ministers Solidarity Group was formed to

convey residents' demands to the LTC. On 8 September a delegation of Vaal church leaders met the council. The Evaton Town Council was invited but failed to attend.

On behalf of Vaal residents, church leaders demanded that:

- * councillors should resign;
- * the rent increase be withdrawn;
- * an independent enquiry into business allocations in the Vaal be set up;
- * all detainees be released and police prevented from harassing hospital patients;
- * police withdraw from the townships.

Councillors refused to meet any demands, or to answer most questions relating to these demands. The delegation saw no point in continuing negotiations.

THE BOYCOTT BEGINS

Up to this point, there was no plan to organise a total rent boycott in the Vaal. The 3 September protests were directed against the rent increase only, and residents were prepared to pay the old rents. At a VCA meeting, a suggestion was made to boycott rent payments until the increase was withdrawn, but this was not taken up. The same suggestion was made in Sharpeville but residents decided to boycott just the increase and continue paying rent at the old rate.

Only when the council ignored the VMSG's post-3 September demands, and indicated that the rent increase was non-negotiable, did the boycott begin.

THE COUNCIL BACKS DOWN

The council did a dramatic about-face on 18 September and withdrew the increases. But it was too late. Council actions over the previous two months showed that it would only negotiate on its own terms. Residents held the council responsible for the loss of life in the first two weeks of September and the rent boycott was a largely unorganised expression of this.

In early October the SADF arrived in the Vaal complete with patronising

pamphlets telling residents who their real friends were and why they should pay rent. But Operation Palmiet had no effect on the rent boycott.

Residents linked the rent boycott to security force violence on and after 3 September. So it was not surprising that the presence of a few thousand soldiers in Sebokeng and Sharpeville only strengthened residents' resolve not to pay rent.

When the council backed down on the rent increase, it also retreated from its policy of not speaking to civic associations. Council circulars announcing the repeal of the increase invited residents to elect delegations to discuss the rent issue with the council.

Sharpeville, Boipatong and Bophelong elected delegations which constituted themselves as civic associations. The three civics met with the LTC and later with the National Party MP for Overvaal, Chris Ballot. Negotiations broke down because the LTC refused to make any concessions the civics regarded as meaningful.

Residents in Sebokeng refused to elect a delegation because all their leaders were in detention or hiding. When the VCA in Sebokeng was revived in May 1985 the newly-elected office bearers stood by this decision.

INDUSTRY AND COMMERCE JOIN NEGOTIATIONS

The Vaal Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the LTC and the OVDB also entered into negotiations at this time. These were initiated by the Vaal Trade Union Co-ordinating Committee (VTUCC) after the LTC asked employers to deduct rents from workers' wages.

Negotiations ran during June and July 1985, but were suspended when VTUCC members were detained during the first state of emergency. Talks resumed in November 1985 and were ultimately abandoned in February 1986.

The LTC was not willing to compromise on the VTUCC's demand for a rental of R30 a month. And, when council obstructionism prevented unions obtaining venues for report-back meetings, the unions saw no point in continuing negotiations.

The council's attitude was curious. It

was totally unwilling to compromise with the civics or unions. It clung resolutely to its position that rents could not be reduced below R60, that as the only 'democratically-elected' body in the Vaal it did not accept calls for its resignation and that it had no say in the affairs of the security forces.

Despite this, the council seemed to believe the rent issue could be resolved through negotiations, which continued for 14 months. Throughout this period the council made no other public moves to deal with the rent boycott. There were no summonses issued and no evictions until well into 1986.

Bureaucratic inertia can account for only some of this delay. Possibly the council was so out of touch with Vaal residents and so blinded by agitator theories that it thought the rent boycott could be stopped simply by explaining the logic behind the budget.

NEW COUNCIL STRATEGIES

The council became more aggressive. On 4 November 1985 it adopted a document entitled 'Strategy for the collection of arrear rental and service charges' which explicitly stated that 'no acknowledgement through negotiations must be given to revolutionary groups or organisations'. It called for the organisation of stop-order facilities from employers for employees' rentals, court orders and evictions, extensive propaganda campaigns and the establishment of paramilitary law and order committees in the township wards.

The new strategy started off badly when the secret document was leaked to the Sharpeville Civic Association barely a week after it passed through the council. The strategy continued unsuccessfully.

Its most glaring failure was the attempt to arrange stop-order facilities for rents. During the 1985 negotiations the Chamber of Commerce and Industry tended to side with the unions against the council. Eventually the council demanded that the head of the Chamber of Commerce be removed from the negotiations chair because of bias against the council.

Local commerce and industry were anxious to prevent residents' discontent

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in the townships spilling over into the workplace. They were definitely not prepared to deduct rent from wages. The Chamber instructed its members that Proclamation R186 of 1967, in terms of which the LTC requested stop order facilities for rents, was invalid. When Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning Heunis introduced a bill in April 1986 to provide for stop order rents, Associated Chambers of Commerce, the Federated Chamber of Industries and the Afrikaner Handelsinstituut mobilised against the proposed legislation and the bill was withdrawn within a month.

Attempts to break the boycott through evictions have been equally unsuccessful. Residents are contesting the validity of the rent increases in court arguing that there were numerous irregularities in the calculation and proclamation of rent increases in the past. It is also not clear whether local authorities may legally evict rent boycotters.

THE BOYCOTT CONTINUES

The council issued 7 500 summonses. Residents have strongly resisted evictions and arrests for ignoring summonses and section 65 notices. A VCA executive member in Sebokeng said residents see the rent boycott in 'political terms'.

In response to the arrests of Sebokeng residents in April the VCA organised a two-day stayaway. Residents went on a march to protest further arrests in May.

The council detained in total about 90 residents in late night raids on 1, 6 and 15 August. They were locked in council offices and after a lengthy wait taken to the township superintendent. They were forced to sign acknowledgments of debt and rent stop-order agreements often without understanding what they were signing. Residents went on a march in protest, and all defaulters were released. No



A councillor killed during the September 1984 uprising

further arrests have occurred. Residents are now taking civil action for wrongful arrest and repudiating the signatures on the stop-order agreements.

In Sharpeville, Boipatong and Bophelong civics have limited themselves to co-ordinating legal action against boycott breaking tactics.

Council evictions have met with widespread resistance. Police have been stoned and petrol bombed. So far only 11 families have been evicted in Sharpeville (on 9 and 16 August) and eight each in Boipatong (15 August) and Bophelong (9 August). In all cases the authorities intended to evict more households but stopped because of resistance from residents. Planned evictions in Sebokeng were postponed possibly because the council feared

large-scale resistance.

The council has also experienced great difficulty in finding families to occupy vacated houses, despite the Vaal housing shortage. In Sharpeville and Boipatong no-one has been willing to replace an evicted family and the empty houses are guarded by council police. Only in Bophelong have people moved off the waiting list into the houses of evicted people, and even there the houses cannot all be filled.

The Vaal rent boycott, already two years old, has cost local authorities R150-m. Each resident owes the Lekoa Council over R2 000. Despite council threats of evictions and arrest, and the vast powers granted security forces under the state of emergency, current prospects of it ending remain slim.

Tumahole Rents: 'This burden is too heavy'

Tumahole lies on the outskirts of the sleepy Free State dorp of Parys. Like most African townships it is characterised by poverty and lack of services.

Officially, its population is 20 000, but residents estimate that over 60 000 live in Tumahole. There are only 2 742 self-built houses on stands rented from the Orange-Vaal Development Board (OVDB), and 254 four-roomed houses built by and rented from the board. Most residents live in shacks.

Employment opportunities are limited, and many residents are either pensioners or unemployed. Those with work are scarcely better off. Just prior to the rent boycott, wages ranged from R40-R60/month for domestic workers to R120/month for factory workers.

In April 1984 the OVDB increased rent from R26,25 to R37. It had risen steeply since 1978 when the board introduced its 'economic rentals' policy.

Sixty-five percent of the OVDB income for 1983-84 came from rentals, and another nine percent from lodgers and hostel permits. Liquor and sorghum beer sales brought in only 12%.

Rent increases were a heavy burden and increasing numbers of people could not pay. By June 1983, R60 718 was outstanding in unpaid rents. A year later the figure stood at R98 845 and by July 1986 each registered tenant owed at least R900.

The Tumahole Students Organisation

(TSO) organised a campaign against the rent increase. In sports grounds, shebeens and bus stations members discussed rents and lack of facilities.

The TSO was formed in September 1980 as a cultural organisation using poetry and drama to conscientise the youth. It gradually became involved in fund-raising to prevent eviction of a deceased's family, helping the aged to collect pensions, assisting parents and students with grievances over schooling, and seeking bursaries for students.

High rents affected students as well as their parents since they meant parents could not pay school fees. Students felt if they did not protest now, the situation would only worsen by the time they were adults. The council had also done nothing about promised recreation centres and other services for youth.

Students visited parents to discuss action around rent increases. They circulated a petition and organised a meeting with councillors who, in turn, refused to answer queries. Residents resolved to boycott the mayor's businesses in retaliation.

In July 1984 an ad hoc civic committee was formed and the Tumahole Civic Association (TCA) was formally launched in October. The TCA organised a march to the community hall on 15 July to demonstrate residents' dissatisfaction. Over 30 000 marched, holding placards reading 'High rent, no jobs' and 'This

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burden is too heavy'. Police dispersed the meeting. Many were arrested and one person died in detention. The mayor's shops were looted.

In the following nine months, residents increasingly supported the civic. The limited legitimacy of the community council was further eroded by councillors' failure to fulfil promises, rising rents, absence of township development and manipulation of trading licences and bursaries. Councillors were frequently asked to resign but only four have done so.

STAYAWAYS AND NEGOTIATIONS

Seven days after the Vaal exploded in September 1984, Tumahole residents stayed away from work and marched to the OVDB offices. Fearing violence the board and community council met civic leaders. The council agreed to freeze rents at R26,25 and to distribute a circular with details of their discussion.

Several meetings with the board followed and the TCA arranged mass meetings before and after to maintain their mandate. The community demanded that rents be reduced to R18,50 and lodgers permits to R6,00; that a sewerage system be installed without charge; that lodger permits be applicable to non-family members only; an end to police raids; and the resignation of community councillors.

OVDB officials agreed that unemployed people could apply to have their rent deferred or their arrears written off. But they insisted that all increases were necessary to balance the council's budget and fund 'development projects'.

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Negotiations ended in deadlock. The OVDB director refused to recognise the civic as representative of the community, and said he would meet residents on 24 March. He then cancelled the meeting. Township youths demonstrated, the beerhall, bottlestore, and houses of police and two councillors were stoned, meetings were banned and residents arrested. Slogans painted on walls read:

'Boycott rent, R18,50'.

Residents decided to launch a boycott from April. Negotiations continued. A planned 6 June meeting was postponed by the OVDB and residents received circulars fixing the rent at R26,50. They were then issued with notices cancelling their residence permits.

OVDB boycott-breaking strategies ranged from co-option to intimidation. The board approached civic leaders to stand for election to the council. When that failed it offered residents bribes. But residents saw the civic as the legitimate alternative to the community council.

In a bid to force residents to pay rent, the board withheld approval of applications for business sites and house construction plans, insisting that applicants first settle rent arrears.

Residents stood firm and in January the board began serving summonses on defaulters. When these were ignored the board issued section 65 notices.

The TCA organised hundreds of residents who received summonses to defend their own cases. Using a single lawyer to defend a group was too costly. As a result, the courts became overloaded with cases.

In July the OVDB announced a rent increase effective from 1 August. It claimed residents had approved an increase to R38,75 when the sewerage project was completed. Residents had paid for sewerage since 1979 but installation only began in mid-1985. They had never agreed to an increase and as unemployment and retrenchment rose, even R18,50 seemed too high. Negotiations ground to a halt. Mass meetings were banned and the TCA refused to negotiate if it could not report back to residents.

FROM VIGILANTES TO SWEET PERSUASION

In January, A-Team vigilantes began to roam the township intimidating residents and activists. After a successful court interdict against the A-Team in May, the Tumahole Action for Unity (TAU) was set up by former A-Team members and administration board police. It was funded by an ex-OVDB official.

TAU members gave children sweets and toys and urged them to persuade their

parents to pay rent. They offered members of youth clubs and music groups gifts, and held lectures on the importance of councils and the need to pay rent. The youth groups approached the TCA and decided to take the gifts back to TAU, saying they would find other ways to get equipment needed.

In desperation the board began evictions in June. It had a tactical advantage: organisation was undermined by the state of emergency and activists were detained or in hiding. Twenty-four people have been evicted since June. Most evictions were random, although seven activists' families were affected.

Evictions usually occur during the day. A court messenger, accompanied by members of SAP and 'green beans' or 'amstels' (administration police), force inmates out of the house and lock it up. Furniture is locked inside. Evicted families are often split up and find accommodation with neighbours or relatives in already-cramped houses.



Tumahole residents now await the outcome of a test case in the Bloemfontein Supreme Court. The applicants, Wilheminah Mofurutsi, Selina Makume and Kleinbooi Lesenyeho, are seeking an order restraining the OVDB and the Free State administrator from obliging them to pay rent arrears.

Between January 1983 and March 1985 Mofurutsi paid R913 rent. She claims she was only liable for R495 because rent increases over the period were invalid. The OVDB, it will be argued, did not have the power to determine rent and service charges. The last legal increase was promulgated by the Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning in March 1979, setting rent and service tariffs at R11,80. All subsequent determinations, according to the

applicants, were invalid. Since they were not promulgated, residents were not notified nor given the opportunity to make representation on the fairness of the proposed increases.

The applicants claim they are entitled to set off the excess paid against the rental due; and that the board actually owes them money.

This case is due to be heard at the end of September.

VREDEFORT: UNDER TUMAHOLE'S WING

Students from Vredefort attend school in Tumahole. In 1985 the Tumahole Youth Congress travelled to Vredefort and spoke to the youth. Shortly afterwards the Vredefort Youth Congress was formed. It called for a rent boycott and for councillors to resign. Residents were paying rent of R26/month but wanted this reduced.

In April 1986 residents marched on the administration offices to protest against rent increases and the council. The offices were stoned. Several residents and youths were arrested, charged with public violence but found not guilty.

The Vredefort boycott was originally organised through the Rent Action Co-ordinating Committee (RACC). RACC was established in October 1984 to co-ordinate rent action against the OVDB in the Vaal and northern OFS and to initiate the formation of civics.

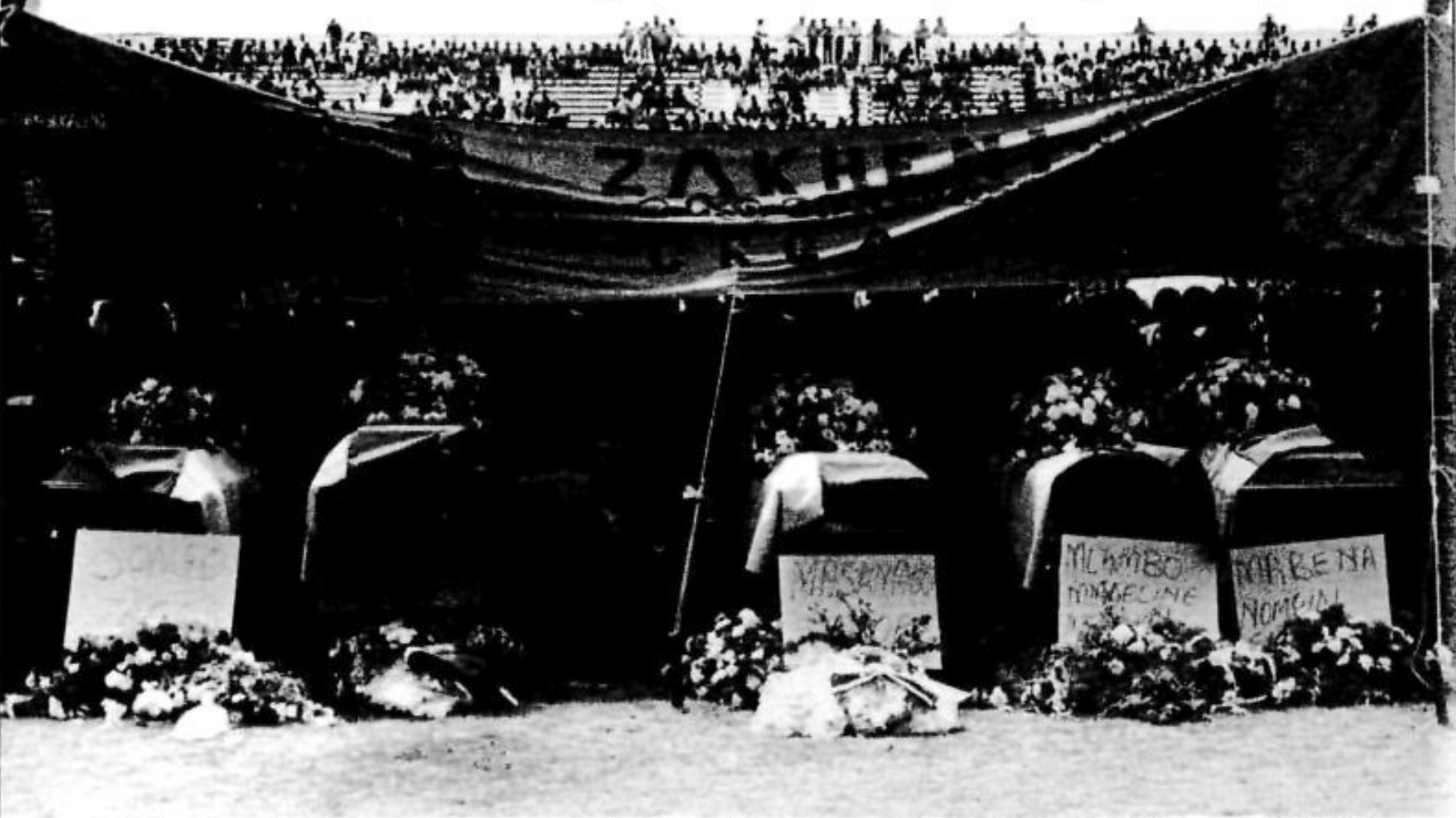
But the Vredefort boycott was more of a spontaneous than organised action. Only about a quarter of the community supported the boycott even before the emergency curtailed activity.

Reasons for the boycott's partial failure possibly lie in the specific nature of the township. It is very small and most students attend school in Tumahole or elsewhere. They are usually at home only on weekends and there has been little progress in building organisation.

The TCA and Vredefort activists eventually decided that Vredefort should be considered part of Tumahole. Vredefort residents were invited to attend meetings in Tumahole in an attempt to politicise the township.

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Massacre Sparks Rent Boycott



Police fired on marchers protesting against the rent hike and police brutality. Thirteen people were killed.

On 17 November 1985, the Mamelodi Parents Action Committee called a meeting to discuss a number of points of conflict. These included:

- * the rent hike. In September 1985 rents had been increased without warning. Although house rent was low, service charges were excessively high, with residents unsure of the exact tariffs. 'Some people were charged as much as R200. If they complained to the council the rent dropped the next month without explanation', said a resident. Residents also had to pay lodgers fees for all people above school-going age. 'Young people felt like foreigners in their own homes'.
- * demands that the SADF leave the township. It had set up camp just outside Mamelodi in July.
- * police brutality to students. Police invaded classes and beat up students for no reason, and students were picked on at funerals.
- * the banning of funerals for unrest victims.

Those present decided on a march to the administration board offices. They intended to discuss the rent hike with the mayor and ask him to lead a group to

the police station where they would demand explanations of police brutality and that police and army leave Mamelodi.

The meeting agreed the demonstration would be a 'mothers' march' with men and youth in the background to help with transport and a house-to-house campaign to publicise the work stayaway. This was partly tactical: they hoped police would not fire on women. And, as a member of the Zakheni Women's Organisation said: 'Women are the real heads of their families. The father's money is his own; he may pay rent and food, but the rest he can spend as he wishes. The mother's money is family money, not her own. If rents increase she would feel and see it more directly if she could not feed and clothe her family'.

On Thursday 21 November, 50 000 people met at the YMCA in East Mamelodi. 'At the bridge we were stopped by casspirs which led us to the administration offices at Mayor Ndlazi's request', recalled a civic member.

'Casspirs were waiting at the gates and Ndlazi was in a hippo at the front. He did not address the crowd. A policeman with a weak loud-hailer told the crowd to disperse. Before five

minutes were up a teargas canister was thrown into the crowd from a helicopter. Then the shooting started from the hippos and the helicopter.

'The crowd scattered, running back into a column of people. As they ran they shouted for people not to pay rent because the councillors and police preferred to shoot rather than talk'. Thirteen people were killed.

ENFORCING THE BOYCOTT

The rent boycott was quickly enforced. This was a result of deep anger caused by the massacre, but also due to the history of organisation in Mamelodi since 1983.

'We set up street and section committees towards the end of 1985 as the foundation for the civic which we launched in April 1986. The rent boycott was discussed and enforced through section committee meetings. Duties of the section committee were to examine legal, rent or eviction problems; family and neighbour disputes; and cleaning the section.

'From December 1985 to February 1986, section committees ran refuse removal and road cleaning programmes when the council stopped these services. Then police began escorting in municipal collectors and the section committees were forced to stop. Children who undertook the clean-up campaigns also returned to school'.

Many families live in shacks behind houses and pay rent to the registered tenant. Should shack dwellers also boycott rent payments? Though the final decision was left to tenants and yard owners, the Zakheni Women's Organisation recommended that where yard owners, particularly if pensioners, depended on tenants for income, tenants should continue to pay rent.

COUNCIL'S BOYCOTT-BREAKING STRATEGIES

Attempting to break the boycott, the council switched off electricity in some areas. This failed, as it could not be widely applied without risking overloaded power lines and the wrath of

ESCOM. Residents demanded ESCOM send accounts directly to them rather than through the council. They hoped accounts would be more accurate and electricity cheaper as the council's additional handling fee would be cut out.

The council forced those applying for taxi or business permits to show recent rent receipts. It also served summonses on rent defaulters. When residents decided to defend themselves in court, summonses were withdrawn.

The council tried to persuade employers to deduct rent from employees' wages. Most refused, saying the work contract only concerned conditions in the workplace, and they did not want problems with their workforce.

The council then issued a warning in terms of the Housing Act, which allowed it to take court action over arrears if it could prove it had built the houses. But the houses had been built by the Pretoria Municipality and the Peri-Urban Boards. The council also claimed service charge arrears, while the Act only allowed for legal action over rents. So this strategy failed too.

Hostel dwellers supported the rent boycott. The September 1984 increases set rental for a bed in a 16-bed room at R20/month or R8/week, a bed in a 4-bed room at R28/month or R11,50/week and a bed in a single room at R34/month or R13,50/week.

HOSTEL DWELLERS EVICTED

Council attempts to divide hostel dwellers and residents failed. But the council has treated hostel rent defaulters with a special vengeance. From April to June the hostels were raided every fortnight. Over 150 people were evicted, and beds, mattresses and personal property confiscated.

Hostel dwellers were charged with trespassing. Most were convicted largely because lawyers had difficulty in gaining access to their clients.

Hostel dwellers were charged under the Black Urban Areas Act, which makes it an offence to be in a hostel without a permit. Convictions were shaky since legally-resident hostel dwellers who have not paid rent still have valid permits to reside in the hostel.

Two hostel dwellers challenged their

Rent Boycott

eviction on the grounds that they had not been given proper notice. They applied for and won an interdict instructing the council to restore their confiscated belongings and re-admit them to the hostel. It is not known whether they were able to return to the hostel, although legally entitled to do so. For hostel organisation has been weakened by the detention of activists, and hostel dwellers may not have been able to enforce their return to the hostel.

The Mamelodi Civic Association is currently challenging the validity of the rent increase in court. It argues that the local council did not follow the correct procedure for publicising the proposed increase. The case has been postponed to the end of September.



Residents reaffirm their commitment to a rent boycott at the November funeral

Jouberton Youth at the Forefront

A rent and bus boycott, sparked by police violence, began in the Klerksdorp township of Jouberton on 10 February 1986.

On 31 January police raided a shebeen and shot a young boy. Residents retaliated with stones and two others were shot. At the funeral on 8 February another person was killed. For the next funeral, two days later, the Jouberton Youth Congress (JYC) asked Western Greyhound to send 15 buses to carry mourners to the graveyard. Greyhound ignored the request and youths decided

to launch a bus boycott.

They commandeered a vehicle and drove through Jouberton telling people not to use buses or pay rent. They felt this was an adequate way of organising the boycott. 'If residents had not been sympathetic they would not have supported the call'. Police escorted buses into the township but people refused to ride. Taxi owners were harassed and their taxis impounded, but boycotters still preferred to walk.

That day the administration board offices were burned down and youths

confiscated residents' rent cards. Frustration with rent increases and community council disinterest in grievances had simmered since September 1985, when rents were increased.

Residents had rejected the increase when councillors announced it at a meeting in November 1984. But in January 1985, councillors railroaded the increase through despite residents' unwillingness to accept it. Those with objections were not allowed to speak.

Councillors did promise to ask employers to increase wages to cover the increase. Until then the current rent would remain. But councillors got only one employer response and in September rent was increased without further consultation.

FORMING A CIVIC

A co-ordinating body was needed to organise the boycott. Church ministers called a meeting to elect a steering body for a civic. The JYC suggested it consist of five JYC members, five teachers and five parents. The community believed a civic could channel grievances to result in meaningful political action. It also hoped the civic would have a moderating effect on the youth.

After the boycotts began, the JYC formed a people's court - when they 'read about it in the newspaper' - as a disciplinary committee to combat the death toll arising from the high crime rate. The committee banned youths from shebeens and punished those who ignored its orders. Shebeen kings and queens

agreed to bar youths although they complained about losing money. Only youths served on the committee but argued that parents supported them as 'they feel the official legal system has failed and only handles political crime'.

Another concerned group, including a taxi owner, shebeen owner and a minister, tried to set up a more moderate committee. They asked the council to call a public meeting to discuss the rent and bus boycotts. The council agreed, but on 6 April troops surrounded the local stadium where the meeting was to take place. Meeting content was also restricted and no political songs or speeches were allowed. Residents boycotted the meeting.

RESIDENTS' DEMANDS

Two weeks later the original civic steering committee called a public meeting. Five hundred attended and ratified the decision to form a civic. Residents also decided not to pay rent until it was reduced from R35 to R5. They also demanded explanations about exorbitant water accounts and fictitious electricity accounts: most houses do not have electricity.

Since the boycotts began, two councillors have resigned. In May the council threatened legal action against defaulters. The deadline for back payments was set as 7 June. In July the town clerk claimed that payment of rents had risen substantially.