



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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South African Bantu women win anti-pass campaign in Orange Free State, 1912-1918

Time period notes: *The Bantu Women's League was established in 1912. The campaign slowed after 1913. The pass requirement was dropped in 1918.*

March

1912

to:

1918

Country: South Africa

Location City/State/Province: Orange Free State

Goals:

For non-white women to no longer be required to carry documents that prove formal employment which restrict movement into urban areas.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions › Petition with 5,000 signatures given to Prime Minister

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 023. Destruction of own property › Tore up and burned passes
- 038. Marches
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Refusal to carry passes anymore

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 4th segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 5th segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 6th segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors › Blue ribbons were used as symbol of campaign
- 135. Popular nonobedience

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Women`s Group

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Charlotte Maxeke, Founder of Bantu Women`s League

Partners:

African National Congress

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

White women in Winburg, South Africa implemented a march to show support

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bantu Women's League

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Bantu Women's League gained participation of the public but it is unknown which specific groups became allies except for the white women's group in Winburg (no date available).

Segment Length: 1 year

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

South African Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

A violent brawl broke out between police and protesting women while women were being arrested

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign was successful in achieving goals with continued resistance in 1918. However in 1923, the Native (black) Urban Areas Act No 21 in 1923 created even tighter controls so that only non-white domestic workers were allowed in urban areas. The campaign was also successful in paving the way for non-violent action in South Africa for women's groups as well as anti-apartheid resistance.

The anti-pass campaign took place in the Orange Free State in South Africa to protest non-white South African women being required to carry documentation of formal employment. Non-white is a term that was often used in South Africa to classify non-European ethnicities including black South Africans, coloured South Africans, and Indian South Africans. The enforcement of passes was meant to establish tighter controls over domestic service. It was mandatory for non-white women to carry documentation that had to be shown to police officers or city officials on their demand.

Passes were a symbol of South African's lack of freedom of movement. Although men were required to carry passes, the Orange Free State was the first province to issue passes for women.

Bantu Women's League was organized out of the African National Congress (ANC) conference in Bloemfontein in 1912 because women were not yet permitted to become members of the ANC. The Bantu Women's League was founded and led by Charlotte Maxeke. Maxeke was the first black South African woman to graduate university. She was educated in the United States and was a teacher until she became an activist and one of the first black South Africans to struggle for rights of women.

The goal of the Bantu Women's League was to force the government to abandon the use of passes for women. The group of women consisted mostly of educated middle class black women. They were inspired by the British Suffrage Movement that they read about in the newspaper and chose to use nonviolent action. In 1906 Gandhi and other South African Indians launched a satyagraha campaign against passes, which eventually succeeded in 1914. [Indians in South Africa wage Satyagraha for their rights, 1906-1914.]

The Bantu Women's League's first action was a petition which gained 5,000 signatures and was handed to Prime Minister Louis Botha in March 1912. When Botha didn't respond, a group of six women went to Cape Town to present their case to Henry Burton, the Minister of Native Affairs. They received the sympathy of the minister and were assured that appropriate action would take place.

After a year of no response, the League and its supporters gathered on 28 May 1913 in Waaihoek to discuss next steps. This mass meeting decided that the women would use civil disobedience by refusing to carry their passes anymore.

Two hundred women marched to the centre of town in Bloemfontein and demanded to speak to the mayor. The mayor showed little sympathy for their cause and responded by saying his hands were tied.

The next day the women marched into town again and protested by ripping up and burning their passes. During the two marches, 80 women were arrested and 34 of them served 2 months in prison. Similar protests were made in other areas of the Orange Free State including Jagersfontein, Fauresmith, and Winburg. Hundreds of women were arrested.

The campaign gained national media coverage in 1913 when they first began to receive greater support for their campaign. The coverage won the sympathy of the Union government officials in Cape Town. Throughout the Orange Free State, blue ribbons were a symbol of participation and support of the anti-pass campaign.

In Winburg a group of white women implemented a march to illustrate their support for the non-white women and their cause. Finally, in 1918, the campaign gained results: the pass laws were finally relaxed.

The women won this specific victory, however, in the context of a larger South African trend of racial discrimination that led finally to the system of apartheid. The trend manifested in 1923 when the government introduced the Native (black) Urban Areas Act No 21 which created even tighter controls so that only non-white domestic workers were allowed in urban areas.

Although the Bantu Women's League Anti-Pass Campaign suspended the policy of passes for only five years, the women paved the way for later nonviolent action in South Africa by women's groups as well as widespread resistance to apartheid.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Bantu Women's League was influenced by the British Suffrage Movement which they read about in the newspaper. (1)

The Bantu Women's League anti-pass campaigns influenced many other anti-pass campaigns as well as other women's rights and anti-apartheid campaigns in South Africa. (2)

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

There is some inconsistency among sources in regards to the dates of the protests. Although the dates for each protest are not easily found, it is often implied that resistance continued right up until 1918 when the laws were relaxed.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Rebekah Grisim, 21/03/2013

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