

AUGUST 9 : NATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

THE WOMEN FIGHT BACK

" You who have no work, speak.
You who have no homes, speak.
You who have no schools, speak.
You who have to run like chickens from the vultures, speak.
Let us share our problems so that
We can solve them together."

These words were spoken by Dora Tamana at the first conference of the United Women's Organisation (UWO) in April 1981.

All over South Africa, women are again joining together to protest against the material hardships imposed by the apartheid system. In Cape Town, the UWO has mobilised women to show their opposition to high rents, busfares and food costs.

In Natal, women have taken an active part in the Durban Housing Action Committee's campaign against rent increases. In Soweto, the Federation of South African Women led a demonstration of 6 000 people in protest against yet another round of rent hikes imposed by the Soweto Community Council.

The participation of women in the struggles of South Africa's communities for better living conditions and human rights is not new. In the long history of women's resistance August 9 1956 marked a high point. This date is remembered as the National Women's Day every year. In the mid-1950's, the government decided to extend the pass laws to include African women. They had tried before in 1913, but the women resisted so strongly that the idea was dropped.

Twenty-five years ago, on August 9, the women's protest against the extension of passes culminated in a massive march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Organised by the Federation of South African Women and the ANC Women's League, 20 000 women made their way to the capital from townships all over the country.

Once there, they gathered in the Amphitheatre and stood in silence for 30 minutes. Then they sang a song specially composed for the occasion:

" Strijdom, you have tampered with the women
You have struck a rock "

The leaders, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, Sophie Williams and the late Lilian Ngoyi, carried piles of petitions containing many thousands of names to the Prime Minister's office. Strijdom, nevertheless, refused to see the deputation.

The march took place against a background of women's resistance nationwide. A year before, at Winburg in the Orange Free State, women had marched to the magistrate's office and burnt their newly-issued passes.

In 1957 the Bafurutse women of Zeerust, in a protest which lasted a whole year, refused to take passes and strongly opposed the implementation of the Bantu Authorities Act. Needless to say, they were brutally harassed by the police.

Again in 1958, 2 000 women were arrested in Johannesburg during two weeks of demonstrations against the pass issue.