

UDF UNITES AGAINST CONSCRIPTION

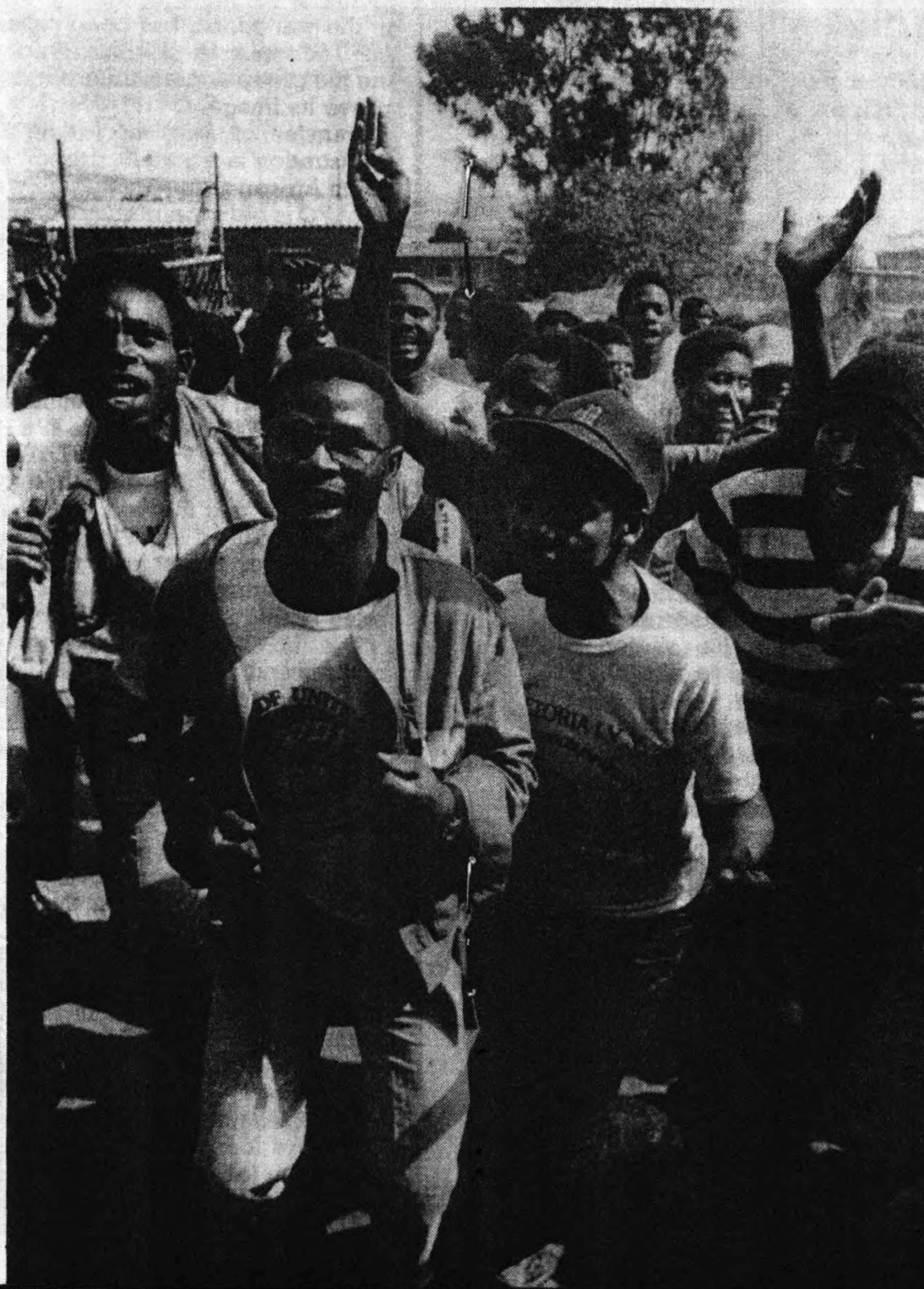
The United Nations has designated 1985 as International Year of the Youth, organised around the theme of 'Peace, Participation and Development'. The UN officially invited the United Democratic Front to participate. To this end the UDF, in conjunction with the South African Council of Churches (SACC), has set up committees and organised activities throughout the country. Over 5 000 people attended the launch of IYY in April. The South African government too has organised its own 'National Youth Year', but due to its apartheid policies it has been excluded from participation in the international event.

In effect there are two 'Youth Years' in South Africa: one connected with the liberation struggle, and the other with the government's attempts to repress that struggle.

For a long time the apartheid state has used cadet training in schools and military conscription from the age of 17 to win the 'hearts and minds' of young people. In the 'National Youth Year' the SADF is conducting a 'goodwill' programme by organising holiday 'army' camps through the Boy Scout movement, especially in the Black communities. The government's view on 'peace' is well known — 'To ensure peace ... a people must prepare for war'.¹

Directly in opposition to this is the UDF International Youth Year (IYY) campaign, which focusses closely on the themes of Peace and Participation. The UDF has expressed its commitment to peace — 'If we want peace in this country, the evil system of apartheid must be removed. That is why we say the struggle for liberation is a struggle for peace.'² Speaking at the rally to launch the IYY in April, Dan Montsitsi said: 'Our aim is for youth to unite', and he added that 'the government is trying to mislead the youth. They have never been serious about development ... in education for example ...'³

YOUTH AND CHURCHES



In this context 'Youth' means all people between the ages of 15 and 30. These are the people to whom each nation looks for its political, social and economic development — and in South Africa it is the young people, particularly in the protests of 1976, 1980 and at present who have been at the forefront of the struggle. Among those detained under the present state of emergency, the majority are youths.

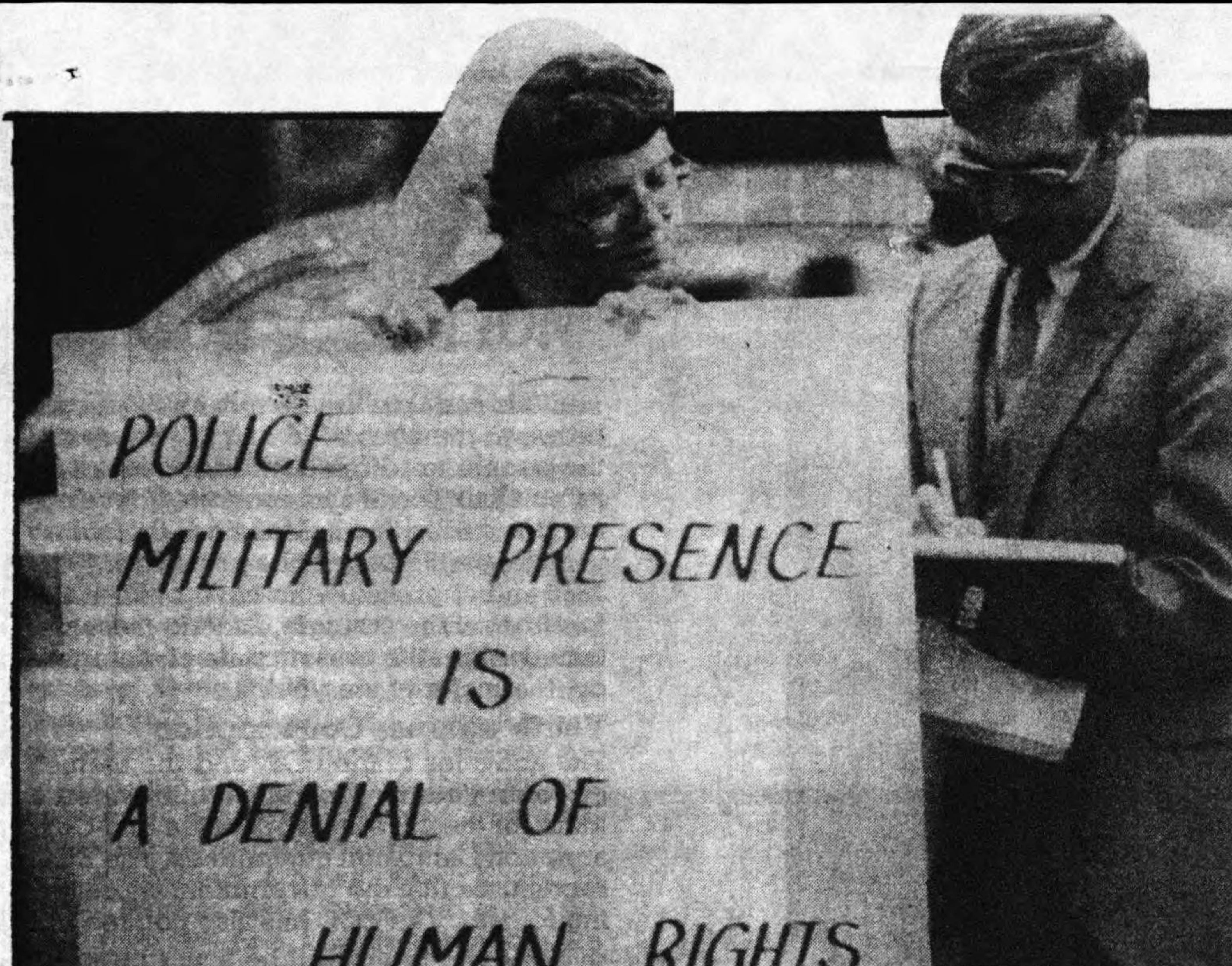
Youth against Conscription

The activities of the UDF, and the themes of Youth Year in general have provided a focus for the growing work of the End Conscription Campaign committees. The ECC recognises that the government is preparing for war. The ECC has also pointed out that this war is and will be a war between South Africans, and that there can be no peace while apartheid exists. As Dr Wolfram Kistner stated to the National Conference of the SACC in June, the South African government has come to 'rely increasingly on the police, the security police and the military to maintain power, because of the growing opposition to it'.⁴

In calling for an end to conscription the ECC has stated that it wants to make serving in the SADF a matter of choice. Were it a matter of choice, many conscripts would not serve in the SADF. Even at this point 7 589 people failed to report for their call up in January of this year,⁵ a five fold increase over 1984. Although the ECC has described itself as an anti-war movement, it is illegal for it to call on people to directly refuse to obey the call-up. In terms of the Defence Act this carries a maximum penalty of R5 000 or 6 months' imprisonment, or both. It has chosen to operate within the constraints of legality, and in an area likely to find support amongst the White liberal community.

While the leadership of the Progressive Federal Party described the ECC call for an

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Churches protest at militarisation.

end to conscription as 'naive and counter-productive', there is a great deal of sympathy for the ECC in the party's youth structures.

Following the further activities of the SADF in Angola in May and the invasion of the townships in June, there has been what ECC National Organiser, Laurie Nathan, calls 'phenomenal support' for the call to end conscription. The movement now has over 40 affiliated organisations, and has established branches in most major centres in the country. In particular this has come from the UDF, and from the churches. To most South Africans the SADF is synonymous with Casspir armoured vehicles, bullets and repression. In the view of Trevor Manuel, this leaves White youth little choice when facing their call-up: '... There is no middle road. You either stand for justice, or you stand against it.'

Churches Join the Call

In June 1985 the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference called for an end to military conscription.⁸ In particular they were concerned at 'the growing number of young men faced with a crisis of cons-

cience caused by their conscription ... our concern as Bishops of Southern Africa is for a speedy and just solution to the problems experienced by its people ... a solution in which all sectors are called to play their part.'

On the same day as the Catholic Bishops made their call the Grahamstown Synod of the Methodist Church issued a statement which opposed conscription because 'conscriptees were being used to uphold the system of apartheid which has been declared a heresy and an evil by the Methodist Church'.⁹ The Anglican Church, too, has voted to support the ECC. This emerged from the conference in July 1985 at which the Church of the Province of South Africa voted to restrict the relationship between military chaplains and the Defence Force.¹⁰ Until now the chaplains have been an integral part of the military structure — to the point of receiving the rank of colonel. At the synod the Church voted that in future the chaplains would avoid identifying with the military in their dress, would be forbidden to carry arms,

would be paid by the Church, and would come directly under the control of the Bishops. This stance derives largely from the Church's conviction that the South African occupation of Namibia is unjust — they have called for an end to conscription there as well.

Peace Festival

The ECC Festival was held in Johannesburg during the last week of June, immediately before the July conscription intake. That over 1 000 people attended indicates the campaign's breadth of support and the immediacy that the issue of conscription has acquired. The Festival organised events over a wide range of topics. The predominant themes were the internal state of war, the presence of troops in the townships and the continued SADF occupation of Namibia. Community leaders from the townships, many of which are currently in a state of siege, testified to the role of troops in suppressing resistance in the townships. A poignant reminder of the grim realities in the townships was the news that the mutilated and charred bodies of Matthew Goniwe and Fort Calata, two prominent UDF leaders in the Eastern Cape, had been discovered near Port Elizabeth. Apparent victims of a hit squad, the two men were to have addressed the ECC Festival.

The Festival included a panel discussion by objectors to military service. Political objector Peter Hathorn declared his commitment to the Freedom Charter. Dr Ivor Toms, who had served as a noncombatant medical orderly, warned against the dangers of complicity even in such a capacity, for 'fixing the man that pulls the trigger is more dangerous than fixing the gun he carries'. Participants at the Festival unanimously carried a motion supporting an end to conscription: 'The building of peace in Southern Africa is threatened by the presence and actions of the SADF in Namibia and elsewhere in Southern Africa and in South Africa's townships We call for an end to conscription which forces young men to fight in these situations.'

State Harassment

In their campaign the ECC have faced harassment from the state. In June the Eastern Cape organiser Janet Cherry was detained (at the time of going to press there are unconfirmed reports that she has been

released).¹² The Cape Town City Council refused in April to carry posters with the words 'Civil war protest' on the grounds that they were 'objectionable'. One edition of *Varsity*, a University of Cape Town paper, was banned when it carried a 'Declaration to End Conscription', although this banning was later overturned. At the hearing of an appeal against the banning, Professor van Rooyen distinguished a call not to serve in the SADF from a 'legitimate and lawful call for the reform of the existing law'.¹³

In the mean time conscription of White males is the fact. The provisions of the Defence Act allow those facing call-up to make one of three choices: to serve in the SADF, to serve a six year prison sentence, or to do six years of 'alternative service'. The fourth option is to go into hiding or exile.

It is clear that the main thrust of the ECC, while encouraging all South Africans to join in its call, is towards those in the country who presently face the call up, and their families. The stated objective of war resistance is to bring about peace, and there can be no peace in South Africa while apartheid exists.

While the ECC is part of the broader struggle against apartheid, its uniqueness lies in its base in the White community, particularly among younger Whites, drawing support from students, scholars and church members. It mobilises support on a specific issue and acts as a link to the broader struggle against oppression. Speaking at the close of the Festival Mike Evans declared: 'If we see apartheid as the root cause of violence in our society then all organisations working for the overthrow of apartheid are part of what can be called a broad movement for peace and justice.'

Footnotes

1. Magnus Malan: Defence Debate, *Hansard* 1984.
2. Quoted in *Grassroots* April 1985.
3. Quoted in *Grassroots* April 1985.
4. *Star* 27.6.85
5. *Observer* 23.6.85
6. *Sunday Tribune* 9.6.85
7. *BBC Monitoring Reports* 3.4.85
8. *Star* 24.6.85
9. *Cape Times* 24.6.85
10. *Guardian* 12.7.85
11. *BBC Monitoring Reports* 4.7.85
12. *Cape Times* 3.4.85
13. *Daily News* 19.4.85
14. *Star* 1.7.85