



Birds in the Cornfield: Squatter Movements in Johannesburg, 1944-1947

A. W. Stadler

Journal of Southern African Studies, Vol. 6, No. 1, Special Issue on Urban Social History. (Oct., 1979), pp. 93-123.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0305-7070%28197910%296%3A1%3C93%3ABITCSM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S>

Journal of Southern African Studies is currently published by Taylor & Francis, Ltd..

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/taylorfrancis.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Birds in the Cornfield: Squatter Movements in Johannesburg, 1944–1947

A. W. STADLER

The Government is beaten, because even the Government of England could not stop the people from squatting. The Government was like a man who has a cornfield which is invaded by birds. He chases the birds from one part of the field and they alight in another part of the field . . . We squatters are the birds. The Government sends its policemen to chase us away and we move off and occupy another spot. We shall see whether it is the farmer or the birds who get tired first. . . .

(Oriël Monongoaha, squatter leader.)¹

I

During the second half of the forties, between 63,000 and 92,500 Africans settled in squatter camps in and around Johannesburg.² The camps were mostly situated beyond the city's south-western borders, in the area which later became Soweto, but there were also camps at Alexandra, ten miles to the north, and at least one within a few miles of the city's centre and one at Alberton, six miles south-east of Johannesburg. The largest of these densely concentrated settlements accounted for anything up to 20,000 inhabitants who occupied dwellings of hessian-sacking, wood, corrugated iron and cardboard. The settlements which will be discussed here were organized into movements led by individual leaders and committees. One such leader,

A. W. Stadler teaches in the Department of Political Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. An earlier version of this article was read to the History Workshop on the 'Witwatersrand: Labour, Townships and Patterns of Protest' held at the University of the Witwatersrand, February 1978.

¹ *Memorandum by the Johannesburg City Council to the Commission of Inquiry into disturbances at Moroka Emergency Camp* (hereafter *JCC Memorandum*), Annexure A (History of squatting movements), p. 50. A supplementary memorandum with annexures was also submitted and will be referred to as *JCC Supplementary Memorandum*.

² The estimate of 63,000 is recorded in *JCC Memorandum, op. cit.* Annexure A. *op. cit.* p. 53. The 92,500 estimate is in *JCC Memorandum, op. cit.* Annexure A1 (Summary of report of special housing Committee to Council meeting held on 17 March 1947, with schedules) p. 1.

James Mpanza, organized his movement as the *Sofasonke* party, which revealed religious and military overtones, while another, Schreiner Baduza, organized squatting as a deliberate strategy in the political struggles of the poor. In most cases, such leaders mobilized a following and settled on vacant land. They levied charges on the inhabitants, established services and an administration, including 'police' and 'courts', and assumed control over trading activities in the camps. The closely settled camps and the considerable authority of the leaders served to increase the autonomy of the squatter communities. The most important settlements became enclaves into which no whites could go except under squatter escort.

This essay will seek to account for squatting movements as a response to the economic and social upheavals of the Second World War. It will argue that during the war there was a crisis on the land which impelled whole families to move to the industrial areas. In the Witwatersrand urban areas, despite an expansion in jobs, there was considerable unemployment; subsistence costs were high and wages very low. Moreover there was a serious shortage of housing for blacks in Johannesburg. The article will trace the course of the movements briefly and describe their structure and organization. It will briefly explore the conditions in agriculture which stimulated family migration and the economic situation of unskilled labour in Johannesburg, particularly wages, employment, and the cost of subsistence. It will examine the housing situation in Johannesburg, and indicate why the municipal administration acted in the way that it did. It will show how conflicts between central government and local government—and behind them conflicts between different interests represented in the state—provided the movements with the precarious opportunity to establish and maintain themselves. The significance of the movements in the development of greater Johannesburg's urban African community will be assessed. Finally, some brief general conclusions will be drawn about the movements which may assist us in understanding some of the processes at work in squatter communities established in South Africa in more recent times.

II

The first squatter movement was organized in Orlando by James 'Sofasonke' Mpanza. Mpanza was a Zulu, born in Natal during the 1890s. Sentenced to death for murder during the 1920s, Mpanza was later reprieved, and probably arrived on the Witwatersrand during the late 1930s. He was elected onto the Orlando Advisory Board, the only form of local representative body available to Africans in the urban areas (with purely advisory functions) some time before leading the first movement. In March, 1944, Mpanza led a group of families living as sub-tenants in municipal housing in Orlando, and others from Kliptown and Newclare, on to open land in Orlando, between the communal hall and the railway line, where

they proceeded to set up hessian shelters.³ Some 250 shelters were originally erected. By 4 April, the number of people present had grown to between 6,000 and 8,000, and at its height, there were 20,000 people in the camp. Orlando was a 'model' location about eight miles from the city which had been established during the early thirties by the Johannesburg Municipality. Kliptown, a much older settlement, lay a few miles to the south of Orlando. Newclare was a freehold area about five miles from the city centre, near to industrial sites. All were severely overcrowded. In 1940, 35,000 people lived in Orlando's 5,091 houses, and 12,000 lived in 2,312 dwellings in Pimville in 1940, before the massive influx of people took place from about 1943 onwards.

Mpanza assembled the squatter movement by persuading the tenants in Orlando to expel their sub-tenants and offered the sub-tenants an alternative form of housing. The Manager of the City Council's Native and Non-European Affairs Department (NNEAD), L. I. Venables, reported that the leaders 'secretly organised a number of persons, predominantly women, to take possession of vacant land.'⁴ Two years later, when Mpanza was organizing another movement, a witness stated that Mpanza told Orlando tenants: 'Now you tenants of this township must take out all of your sub-tenants; kick them out put them in front of your doors in the street . . .'⁵ It may also have been so in 1944. Neither group could have needed much persuading. The City Council had allowed tenants in Orlando to accommodate sub-tenants, but had not permitted extensions to be built onto the houses themselves. About 30 per cent of the housing in Orlando consisted of three-roomed dwellings; the rest had two rooms, and there were a few single rooms. In 1940 the average number of people in these two and three roomed houses was six. Four years later it had probably increased by up to a third more.

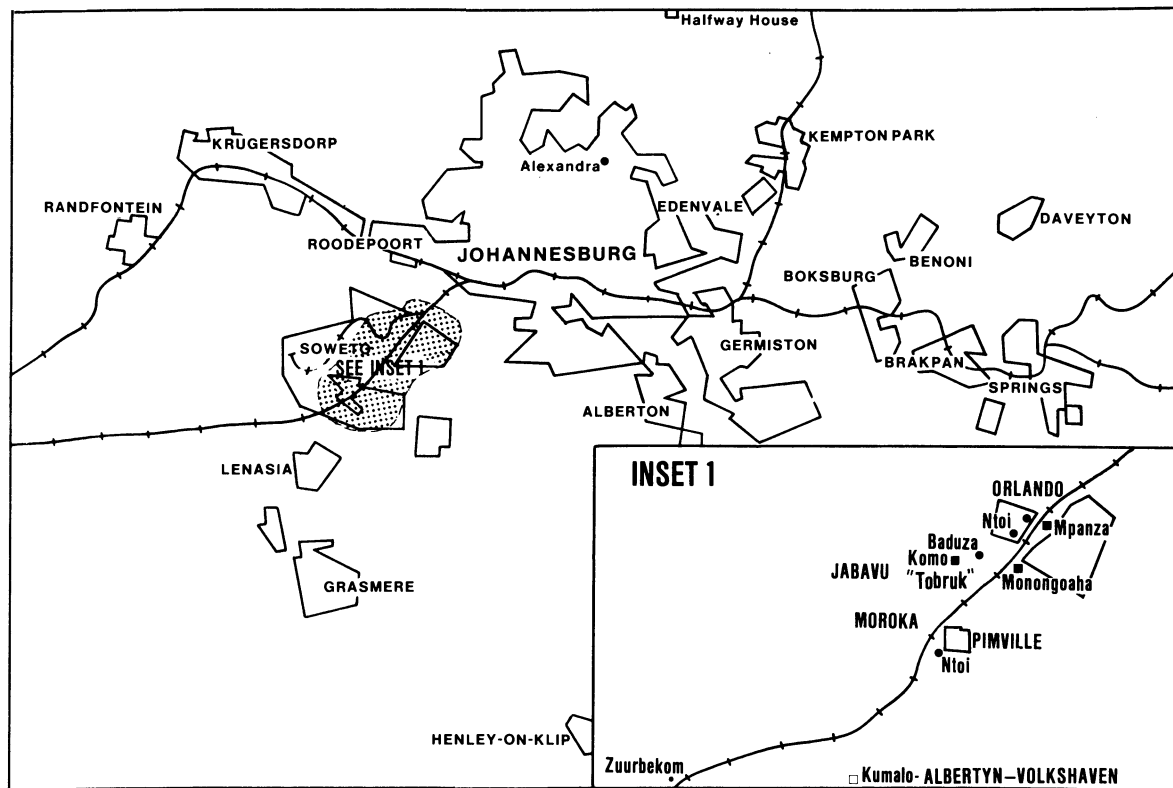
Initially, the City Council decided that the squatters should be prosecuted, but the central government took the view that 'nothing could be gained by chasing a number of people from a spot where they were settled unless the authorities know of a place to which they could go'.⁶ By the end of March, the Council began its slow and reluctant retreat before the squatters when it resolved not to prosecute them on condition that there was no more movement into Mpanza's camp at Orlando. It was decided that the squatters could remain, pending the provision by the Council of temporary

³ *Commission of Inquiry into the disturbances of the 30th August, 1947, at the Moroka Emergency Camp, Johannesburg*, chairman H. A. Fagan, Annexure 145—1948 (hereafter *Moroka Disturbances*) p. 24. The account of the squatter movements follows this report in most respects.

⁴ Johannesburg City Council, *Mayor's Minute*, 1948, p. 6.

⁵ JCC *Supplementary Memorandum op. cit.* Annexure P (p. 80) and Annexure S (p. 25).

⁶ *Moroka Disturbances, op. cit.*, p. 25.



Central Witwatersrand and Location of Squatter Communities 1944-46

housing in 'breeze-block' rooms in the camp and that free water and sanitary services would be laid on. These 'breeze-blocks' were large bricks made from a mixture of ash and cement. There was a plentiful supply of ash in the locality from the Orlando power station. The rooms were constructed without mortar so that the bricks could be used for permanent dwellings. These unmortared rooms remained until the sixties. By the end of May 1944, 200 rooms had been built. By October 1945, 4,042 had been built to accommodate 20,000 people, and the last of the squatters' shacks in 'Shantytown', as Mpanza's camp came to be called, had been demolished. With the resettlement of Mpanza's squatters accomplished, the Council decided to take action against Mpanza, and in January 1946, attempted to get him removed from Johannesburg under Section 5 of the Native Administration Act, a move which the central government supported after some prevarication. Mpanza stalled the proceedings by taking the matter to court, and it was at this stage that the second movement in Orlando began.

This second movement was preceded by a request from elected members of the Orlando Advisory Board to the City Council to provide tents or land for sub-tenants. A series of meetings were held, culminating in a mass meeting of tenants on 27 January 1946. There was some confusion about what this meeting decided. According to the Council's representatives at the meeting, it decided that sub-tenants would not be expelled for one month, but Mpanza reportedly contested this interpretation of the meeting. In any event, on the day after the meeting a thousand families arrived at the offices of the Orlando Location Superintendent and claimed that they had been expelled by the tenants of Orlando. There being no accommodation for them, they began to occupy 45 partly completed and 15 temporarily vacant houses which had already been allocated to people on the Council's waiting list. Municipal officials realized that there was no point in trying to disperse the movement, and requested the Council to set aside land for them and to procure tents from the central government. They also believed that the South African Police could reduce the numbers by removing 'trespassers'—people not employed or normally resident in Johannesburg. In addition they decided to warn two Orlando Advisory Board members, Lukas Kumalo and G. G. Xorile, who along with Mpanza were suspected of organizing the movement, that they might be removed from Johannesburg. A third individual, Edward Kumalo, who was also involved, was removed from the area, though he returned early in 1947 to organize a camp at Volkshaven, beyond the municipal boundary to the south-west.

The efforts to house people in tents proved farcical. The tents made available by the central government were insufficient in numbers, and most had no poles. Furthermore, the Health Department complained that a tent colony would endanger public health. So the Council decided to prevent the squatters from occupying houses; in the belief that if this were done, 'the

whole movement would collapse of its own accord.'⁷ The Council saw the issue as a trial of strength involving the principle of 'law and order' as well as the claims of people on the waiting list for municipal houses in Orlando. But the central government insisted that no order for ejection could be made unless alternative accommodation were provided, even if it were the barest minimum. The South African Police considered that, though they could enforce an order ejecting squatters from the houses, they could not prevent reoccupation, and decided that they should confine police action to quelling any disturbances which might result. But at least firm action could be taken against Mpanza, or so it was thought, and an order for his removal to the farm 'Coldplace' in the Ixopo district of Natal was issued on 6 February. Mpanza ignored the order and was arrested. He was convicted in the magistrates' court, but appealed against his conviction, and though the Provincial Division upheld the conviction, he won an appeal to the Appellate Division in September 1946.

Legal action against the squatters proved to be equally difficult. In mid-February 1946, the City Council succeeded in obtaining a court order to eject the squatters. The order was executed with the support of 750 men drawn from the South African Police and the Municipal police force. But approximately 200 to 300 families simply moved to a piece of land barely 50 yards away from the houses and tried to erect hessian shelters on the adjacent site. The police prevented them from doing so, but it rained on the afternoon of 8 March, and some women, anxious for their sick children, persisted in their desperate attempt to put up shelters. Against the advice of the police, NNEAD officials instructed Municipal workers to pull down these shelters. A fracas resulted in which two people were killed. The squatters drove the police and municipal workers into the communal hall, and occupied the area in front of it. Stories began to circulate that the squatters were making knives and spears, and were holding the area in front of the communal hall against all comers. It is not clear how long this situation persisted or how long the settlement survived but it would seem that by mid-February most of the community's resistance was shattered. In early April 1946, something like 1,000 families were removed to Jabavu, where the construction of 'breeze-block' rooms was begun.

In the following month, March 1946, the third movement emerged, this time in Pimville. In undertaking to resettle Mpanza's squatters, the Municipality had accepted responsibility for providing sites and making services available for squatters normally resident and employed in Johannesburg.⁸ The Municipality would provide sites; the squatters would

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

erect temporary shelters; and in order to fulfil its commitments to people on the Council's waiting list, the Municipality would also provide breeze-block shelters adjacent to Orlando. The occupants of breeze-block rooms in Jabavu would move back into Orlando as sub-tenants, while sub-tenants on the waiting list would move into the breeze-block shelters. A census was taken under police protection, and the police also undertook to prevent the influx of people into the area. Not unexpectedly, the squatters refused to accept an arrangement whereby they were supposed to replace the rehoused Orlando sub-tenants. The Council retaliated to this by halting the construction of breeze-block rooms.

In meeting its commitments to rehousing squatters from Orlando, the Municipality neglected in some degree the claims of people living in areas outside of Orlando. It had promised to rehouse Pimville sub-tenants in 2,350 new houses to be constructed in Orlando West. Because of the pressure from Orlando, it adopted a quota system, whereby new houses would be distributed to the inhabitants of different areas on a *pro rata* basis as each new batch of houses was completed. The squatter movements in Pimville expressed the demands of people who had, or appeared to have, lost their place in the queue because of the successes of the earlier movements. When the decision to distribute housing on a *pro rata* basis was announced, Abiel (or Abel) Ntoi, chairman of the Pimville Sub-Tenants Association, objected, and when it became known in February 1946, that Pimville sub-tenants would get only 36 of a batch of 150 new houses, he was further annoyed. Ntoi's anger arose not simply out of a disinterested concern for the well-being of Pimville sub-tenants—he had his own waiting list, consisting presumably of political clients, which the Council ignored. So possibly too did other organizations representing various sections of the Pimville community—the Pimville Advisory Board (officially recognized); the Pimville Residents' Committee, the Pimville African Womens' Association, and the Pimville Municipal Tenants Association.⁹

On 24 March 1946, Ntoi led 90 people to Orlando West and camped (initially without families or household effects) near a batch of half-completed houses. This camp grew until it contained about 800 families. The squatters were ordered to move, but after a week there were still 450 families in the camp. On 20 May, the camp was surrounded by the police, and the squatters were ordered to go to Jabavu with their shacks. This, however, did not settle the problem in Pimville and Orlando. On 7 September, about 800 families settled on land in Pimville which had been cleared of 'insanitary' dwellings in preparation for the construction of new houses. The number of squatters in the camp trebled within a week. This time, the movement was led by Oriel Monongoaha, chairman of the

⁹ JCC *Memorandum, op. cit.* Annexure A1, p. 6.

Pimville Sub-Tenants Vigilance Committee. Once again the camp was cleared with assistance of the police. But while some families returned to Pimville, Monongoaha led 1,500 families to the south-west corner of Orlando. A 'coloured' ex-serviceman, Samuel Komo, challenged Monongoaha's leadership, and about 300 families moved off with him to a portion of the camp which they named 'Tobruk', a name with a stark symbolism of resistance in South Africa, particularly among ex-servicemen.

The Council again tried to eject the squatters and obtained a rule *nisi* against them at the end of October. But the camp continued to grow until it contained between 3,000 and 5,000 families—far too many for ejection to be practicable. The squatters consolidated their position. Monongoaha demanded that the Council provide basic services and threatened that if they did not he would either tap the water-mains or put up windmills. He also threatened to appeal to the central government to force the Municipality to provide services, or to provide them and charge the cost to the Municipality.¹⁰ The Municipality was reluctant to provide such services for a number of reasons. In particular, it feared that if it did so, its action might be

construed by the squatters as a tacit recognition of their presence and a moral justification of their actions, and would not only encourage those at present there to remain, but would accelerate the already rapid process of enlargement of the camp.¹¹

Accordingly the Council resolved on 17 December 1946, that the 'removal of the squatter camp is the only reasonably practicable measure to remedy such conditions.' At about this time the situation in Orlando was further complicated by the arrival there on 29 November 1946, of between 600 and 800 families led by Schreiner Baduza, chairman of the Alexandra Tenants' Association. Baduza had made an attempt earlier in the month to establish a camp on private land at Lombardy East, a mile or so to the east of Alexandra, but the police demolished the shacks and arrested Baduza and his lieutenants. Baduza then made a second attempt to start a camp in Alexandra, but was persuaded by the Native Commissioner there to move to Orlando. Baduza's squatters erected their hessian shelters near to Komo's 'Tobruk', raising a banner inscribed with the legend 'Alexandra Tenants' Association—We Want Land.' The Municipality secured a removal order against Baduza and his followers, and they were transported back to Alexandra where they settled on two squares in the township. The City Council undertook this act despite the fact that it did not have jurisdiction over Alexandra, and had not bothered to consult the Alexandra Health Committee before re-settling the squatters.

¹⁰ JCC *Supplementary Memorandum, op. cit.* Annexure T (p. 90).

¹¹ *Moroka Disturbances, op. cit.*, p. 69.

At least four other movements took place during 1946 and 1947. A group settled on commonage at Alberton, a town situated about six miles to the south-east of Johannesburg, and were removed by the Union Department of Native Affairs to Hammanskraal beyond Pretoria. The reason for this swift action by the central government, usually so tardy in these matters, was that most of them were unemployed, and the significance of this action will be assessed later. A smaller number of squatters tried to settle on the farm Zuurbekom, away to the south-west during November 1946, and again during February 1947, but on each occasion these movements were defeated by the combined action of the South African Police and the Municipality. The third movement was led by Edward Kumalo—the man who had taken part in the second Orlando movement. He settled followers on farm land at Volkshaven, beyond municipal jurisdiction, and moved a few days later to Alberton close by. The Volkshaven-Alberton squatters claimed that they had been sold land by one Ephraim Moonshi, who died while a case for fraud was being prepared against him. By August 1947, the Kumalo camp contained between 1,500 and 2,000 families. The Municipality did not try to break this camp, and indeed supplied it with water. Finally, a group of 25 families tried to settle in Newclare, near the railway station, during September 1947. In this case the adult males were arrested under the pass laws, and their shacks were demolished.

From the beginning of 1947, the Municipality began to put into effect a new plan. While this did not eliminate squatting, it placed squatter movements under increasing municipal control, and was specifically aimed at breaking the power of the squatter leaders. The Council realized that although small movements, such as the Zuurbekom and Newclare groups could easily be broken, large and well-organized groups of squatters could not be eliminated by harassing their leaders or trying to move them beyond the city's boundaries. The central government argued that the only solution to squatting was the development of 'controlled' camps, something on the lines of the Jabavu breeze-block rooms in which Mpanza's squatters had been settled.

In essence, the 'emergency scheme' proposed by the Municipality in pursuit of this plan made land and services (including clinics) available to 10,000 squatter families who would pay a composite fee of 15 shillings per month for these facilities. Under the scheme, squatters in Orlando and Alexandra would be settled in Moroka. The settlement already established in Jabavu was consolidated with Moroka. This resettlement of squatters was more or less completed by mid-1947. As the squatters were moved, they were, in the jargon of the administration, 'culled' of families whose breadwinners could not show that they were resident or employed in Johannesburg.

These 'culling' drives were conducted on a large scale and involved close

co-operation between the Municipality and South African Police. Thus at the end of April 1947, a force of 700 policemen, drawn from both South African Police and the Municipality, cordoned off and combed through Monongoaha's and Komo's camps arresting 386 people, including Komo. These squatters were charged with a variety of offences: 108 were found guilty under the pass laws and 'dealt with' by the Native Commissioner. Another 250 were prosecuted under Section 29 of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act which provided for the removal of 'idle, dissolute or disorderly Natives' and warned to find work, while the leaders were charged with assault, extortion, and malicious damage to property. Penalties were imposed on persons who collected money for purposes connected with squatting; 'undesirables' were removed from Johannesburg.

As part of the campaign to destroy the power of the squatter leaders, the Municipality sought to break their control over trading in the squatter camps. These efforts precipitated the 'disturbances at Moroka' on 30 August 1947, in which three members of the South African police were killed. Mpanza who had established shops in his camp, charged £25 for trading concessions and sites. He also tried to prevent shop-keepers from Orlando trading in 'shantytown'. Bakers had to pay £2 10s. per van for the right to bring bread into the camps. As a means of breaking Mpanza's control, the Municipality decided to issue licences to traders in the emergency camps. The Municipality claimed that it did not intend to deny 'illegal' traders the opportunity to get municipal licences. On the contrary, it decided that other things being equal, it would give preference to 'illegal' traders who had business contacts with wholesalers. But few 'illegal' traders applied for licences. It was widely believed that they were 'discriminated against because they were squatters or because they took part in the rent boycott'.¹² It is also possible that they did not have contacts with wholesalers, and lacked the qualifications which the municipality considered important. In the event, all but three licences in the camp were issued to people from outside Moroka. A crowd of 200 attacked the licenced stalls and stoned the group of policemen who tried to disperse them. As a further effort to destroy the power of the squatter leaders, the Municipality held Advisory Board elections. The result was the election, on the basis of a 'mandate' from 13 unopposed candidates 'representing' 6,500 voters (with 10 other wards vacant) of a Board presided over by the sociologist, Winifred Hoernlé. Admittedly the Municipality was not solely responsible for this curious outcome of the democratic process; Winifred Hoernlé who was closely associated with the Institute of Race Relations had

¹² *Evidence by the Joint Council of Europeans and Africans to the Fagan Commission of Inquiry into the Moroka Riot, JC 24/47, September 15, 1947*, p. 5. There is a collection of the annual reports of the Joint Council in the Ballinger Papers in the library of the University of the Witwatersrand.

been chosen from a panel of 'fourteen European and Native names approved by the Minister of Native Affairs'.¹³

During 1947 and 1948, the Municipality gradually eroded most of the movements and resettled the squatters in the emergency camp. By April 1948 most of the hessian shelters had been replaced with shacks of mud brick roofed with corrugated iron. This, however, was not the end of the resistance—the squatter movements were succeeded by rent strikes. The rent charged for a stand in the emergency camp was 15s. a month, while the 'breeze-block' rooms constructed of material supplied by the Municipality cost only 5s. a month. An even greater anomaly was that a two-roomed Municipal house with services cost only 13s.4d. In a remarkable example of tortured logic and parsimonious calculations, the Municipality gave as the reason for the high rents in the emergency camps (aside from their promising to reduce deficits) that they had to be 'high enough to deter householders from joining squatting; not so high as to result in boycott of camp and mass squatting on free ground; not so low as to result in occupants refusing to move to temporary housing when ready.'¹⁴ In consequence, a rent 'strike' began before the removals to the emergency camp got properly under way. Of the 1,750 registered occupants of Jabavu, only 43 paid rent for May 1947 and only two paid for June. Here again it was Abel Ntoi who was active in the no-rent campaign. In mid June he held a meeting on the border between Moroka and Jabavu. At a subsequent meeting on 22 July, members of his committee collected about 2s.6d. per person to brief counsel on the issue. In November, the rents were reduced to 10s. a month, which had some effect on the payment of rents in Moroka, but not in Jabavu. By mid-1948, five out of six householders were still refusing to pay rents. They were depositing their rents with a committee which was organizing the defence of a test case. The *Asinamali* ('no money') party, was organized in Jabavu by Peter Lengeni to sustain the strike. The strike ended when the strikers lost the test case, and the municipality took strong action against rent defaulters.¹⁵ The rent strike became connected with a variety of other issues; with the boycott of Advisory Board elections and, according to a submission by the Council to the Moroka inquiry, attacks on shops.¹⁶ The rent strike was becoming linked, argued the Council, with the 'general political question of the disabilities of Natives.' The 'failure of the authorities to immediately provide promised social amenities provided a "cause" . . . These causes are woven into a general attack on the authorities . . .'¹⁷

¹³ JCC *Memorandum*, *op. cit.* Annexure A, p. 68.

¹⁴ JCC *Memorandum*, *op. cit.* Annexure A1, Schedule 2, p. 6.

¹⁵ Interview with W. J. P. Carr, assistant manager (later manager) of the NNEAD, August 1977. I must thank Mr Carr for granting the interview.

¹⁶ JCC *Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, Annexure A, p. 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

There was something about the rent strike however, which gave it the potential for generating broader and more radical political action than the squatter movements out of which it grew. For one thing, its objectives were more radical. As Ntoi made clear when he announced that he intended not to reduce rent, but to eliminate rent: 'the people should not pay any rent at all, because the Council would use this money to build houses for Natives for which they would, in due course, also have to pay rent.'¹⁸ The rent strike demanded greater individual commitment than squatting. Collectively the squatters generated considerable power, but it was always based in the physical presence of large groups, and it lost its cohesiveness as soon as the authorities could find some way of drawing the squatters away. Squatting was based on a short-term optimizing strategy, rather than on long-term political calculations, and for this reason leaders were unable to hold the support of their followers once they were unable to offer a better deal than the Municipality, or able realistically to challenge the coercive power of the state. The squatters were to some extent always inward-looking and vulnerable as soon as they moved outside the camps. In optimal conditions they might, like the birds in the cornfield, move from one part of the field to another, but they were netted and caged, first in the emergency camp, and eventually in schemes developed by local and central government.

While measures such as the emergency scheme and the attack on the leadership to some extent explain the decline of the movements, it should also be emphasized that the general economic and political conditions which had made them possible had begun to change by 1947. The presence of widespread unemployment in Komo's camp suggests that during the post-war recession, industry's need for labour was less pressing. The increased use of pass law and influx control from 1947 onwards, and especially from 1948, may suggest that agriculture was regaining ground which it had lost to industry, even before the 1948 election. After the election, the balance of forces changed in a direction which made squatting more difficult. And by then, anyway, the housing situation had altered as it became an important feature of the next government's policy.

III

Official views of the organization of the squatter camps convey the impression that the leaders were simply authoritarian bullies exploiting the plight of the homeless for gain, and that the camps were the habitats of prostitutes and vagrants. Thus Mpanza, in the view of the Municipality, was 'dictatorial and truculent';¹⁹ Ntoi was a man with a 'difficult temperament. He is unable to co-operate with any other organisation. He is

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹ *JCC Memorandum, op. cit.* Annexure A, p. 2.

essentially a dictator.’²⁰ The Council considered that ‘all the so-called leaders of the squatter camps at Tobruk to be self-appointed, to have no democratic mandate on behalf of the squatters.’²¹ Their power was commonly understood by municipal officials to rest on coercion. Thus one report referred to

acts akin to terrorism, i.e. squatters who have voluntarily left the area . . . have been forcibly made to return. Furthermore, in order to enlist public sympathy, native women in the last stages of pregnancy and also those with newly born children have been compelled to take up occupation in the areas.²²

The Municipality collected affidavits which alleged beatings and other brutality.²³ Furthermore, according to the Municipality’s Welfare Officer,

99 per cent of the squatters are intruders from outside the Johannesburg area . . . the vast majority of these intruders are adventurers and gamblers, particularly among the women, of a type attracted to Johannesburg by the prospect of making money from organized prostitution and illicit liquor selling.²⁴

Clearly, the leaders did exercise power within the camps. They issued squatter ‘permits’ for a fee. They had an organization which regulated entry to the camps, expelled non-members, administered facilities, and punished offenders against regulations with fines and beatings. All outsiders including, for example, ‘European newspaper reporters’, were subjected to their discipline.²⁵ As we have just mentioned, they also controlled trading in the areas and charged traders a fee for the right to enter the camps. If such acts were ‘akin to terrorism’ they were remarkably similar to the methods employed by the Government and the Municipality in controlling blacks. What particularly irked the Municipality was the way in which the movement displaced the state as the effective power in the areas under their control. As one report correctly stated, ‘Municipal control over the Orlando township . . . is practically nil’ and Komo, Monongoaha and Baduza had arrogated to themselves ‘all state and governmental functions in Tobruk and Alexandra camps’.²⁶ Mpanza overshadowed them all in his arrogation of power.

After his successful appeal in September 1946, ‘the squatters are now openly hailing Mpanza as King . . .’ He claimed, so it was said, that ‘the Law could not touch him . . . The Council had no standing in Orlando and he

²⁰ JCC *Supplementary Memorandum, op. cit.*, p. 27.

²¹ JCC *Memorandum, op. cit.*, Annexure A, p. 67.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²³ JCC *Supplementary Memorandum, op. cit.*, p. 94 (Annexure X).

²⁴ Quoted in *Memorandum on Moroka riot 30/8/1947 by The District Commandant, South African Police, No. 39 (Johannesburg District)* (hereafter *Police Memorandum*) Annexure E. p. 1.

²⁵ JCC *Mayor’s Minute, op. cit.*, 1944f1948, p. 6.

²⁶ JCC *Memorandum, op. cit.*, Annexure A, pp. 2 and 21; JCC *Memorandum, op. cit.*, p. 7.

had described himself as King of Orlando and people were paying admission to see him.²⁷

Furthermore the leaders used their power to resist efforts by those in authority to draw the squatters away. For instance two City Councillors, Colin Legum (later of the London *Observer*) and M. J. Green, spoke to squatters in Orlando on one occasion. As soon as they had finished speaking, Mpanza and Kumalo went to the microphone and 'told the Natives not to listen to what they had been told by the Council's representatives as they were trying to mislead them.'²⁸ Similarly, when the Municipality was trying to resettle Alexandra squatters during April 1947, Baduza was requested to arrange a meeting of squatters so that the resettlement scheme could be publicized. Baduza got the message, but made no response, nor did he attend the meeting arranged in the township.

Native interpreter messengers were sent through the camp calling people together, but they had obviously been instructed to boycott the meeting and refused to attend. The Native Commissioner, after waiting an hour, proceeded to address a small group of people . . . Baduza's armed 'police' immediately appeared and with a show of force and the brandishing of sticks and sjambocks, drove away those who had gathered around the officials.²⁹

The next day the meeting was re-convened, Baduza attended, launched a verbal attack on the officials present, and when he had finished speaking, 'the people, at a signal from Baduza, broke into song and dispersed.'³⁰

Despite the allegations of violence and corruption levelled at some of the most important leaders, they were not simply gangster chiefs. Although the evidence is fragmentary, what bits can be pieced together of the movements reveal powerful reciprocal relationships of authority and trust between squatter leaders and their followers. Mpanza's *Sofasonke* Party assembled a following, particularly among women, with religious and military overtones. '*Sofasonke*' ('We shall all die together') was probably derived from the oath which Mpanza allegedly had his lieutenants swear. Mpanza is supposed to have said: 'You are all soldiers. You have joined forces with me and you will die where I die.' His lieutenants repeated: 'Yes chief, we are your soldiers. We have joined with you—we shall die where you die'.³¹ While serving his sentence for murder, Mpanza had become converted to Christianity, and his public utterances were dense with biblical allusions, including comparisons between himself and Jesus Christ. After his release on bail in 1944, he exhorted his followers not to be afraid: 'The position of the chieftainship is given to me like Jesus. Many people thought I was

²⁷ JCC Memorandum, *op. cit.*, Annexure A, p. 28.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁹ JCC Supplementary Memorandum, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³¹ JCC Supplementary Memorandum, *op. cit.*, p. 90 (Annexure T).

arrested, and yet I was not. The same as with Jesus. Many thought he was dead, and yet he was not.’³² At the time of his court case, women appeared on the steps of the Supreme Court in Johannesburg dressed in elaborately decorated robes. These ritual manifestations of support do not indicate a ‘truculent dictator’. Indeed his affairs were constantly surrounded by an elaborate and dignified ritual. When he won his appeal case in 1946 he organized a celebration. A crowd gathered at his house, an ox was slaughtered, and the meat was ceremonially distributed to various groups in the location. A song ‘We have won the case at Bloemfontein’, composed specially for the occasion, was sung. Women ululated; a praise-singer lauded him in Sesotho. He was hailed as ‘*Maghebula*’ (peeler or slicer—the one who sliced land from the Municipality). ‘After the feasting, more people came from the location dressed in African fashion of the old days.’³³ These accounts suggest that Mpanza was attempting to clothe his power in prophetic authority—charismatic in a strictly Weberian sense—and that he was trying to establish linkages in the locations beyond his immediate following. A Zulu speaker, Mpanza’s speeches were usually translated into Sesotho: He sought to reach beyond tribe as well as locality. In this he was not very successful. Unlike Ntoi, he failed to adapt to the politics of the rent strike, and the emergency camp put paid to his power. But his failure was not attributable simply to a lack of authority. Perhaps the measure of his authority is best seen in the tributes which come from the people of Soweto, who thirty years later, recall his name with pride and pleasure. Mpanza is referred to today as: ‘The man who founded Soweto’, the ‘man who built himself up from nothing’. And although its links with the squatter movements of the 1940s are probably tenuous, there is a *Sofasonke* Party in Soweto to this day.

The authority of other leaders had different bases. Schreiner Baduza, along with the novelist and poet Modikwe Dikobe, were associated in a number of working class movements in Alexandra before they became involved in squatting. They had been active in organizing tenants’ movements and bus boycotts during the early 1940s. Baduza saw himself as the instrument of a committee of the ‘people’s movement’. He himself was reluctant to lead a squatter’s movement, but had been persuaded to do so by his committee. During the early forties he ran a successful business in Alexandra making metal burglar-proofing for windows. His involvement in the squatter movements ruined the business.³⁴ Oriel Monongoaha held a clear conception of community development. He issued a memorandum during 1947 which demanded larger sites for rehoused squatters so that

³² *Ibid.*, p. 82 (Annexure N).

³³ *Bantu World*, 12 October 1946.

³⁴ Interview with Schreiner Baduza, January 1978.

squatters could keep livestock and vehicles 'Like horses, cattle, motor cars, trollies and etc.'³⁵ He envisioned the idea of a 'transportation co-operation' which could help finance 'bursaries for Native children and students, and eventually contribute to the financial development of the African people as a whole.' The squatter leaders were also accused of making a great deal of money. Ntoi is said to have bought property at Evaton; Mpanza to have acquired a number of racehorses. Whether these stories are true or not is difficult to substantiate. Most leaders faded into penurious anonymity. In his late middle age Baduza was working in a lawyer's office in Johannesburg; Dikobe has a modest pension and lives on a small plot in the northern Transvaal, while Monongoaha returned to Lesotho.³⁶

The allegations that the squatter leaders were simply small-time dictators have little substance, but there were nevertheless serious limitations on the capacities of the leadership, for when stripped to its essence, the leadership constituted a form of bossism. The Municipality correctly appreciated that they could break the movements if they could draw the squatters away from the leaders and offer something better. The squatter movements did not forge conscious relationships with any African political organizations, though some of the leaders may have been members of political bodies. The president-general of the African National Congress (ANC), Dr A. B. Xuma, spoke in Baduza's camp in Alexandra on one occasion,³⁷ but the ANC does not seem to have taken up the issue of squatting. Reports of the Congress conference of 1946 suggest that it was preoccupied with the miners' strike, and made no mention of squatting.³⁸ The ANC was at that stage undergoing the conflicts between the established, rather conservative leadership and more radical elements in the Youth League. The only figure of significance in the broader context of African politics who concerned himself seriously with the squatters was Paul Mosaka, member of the Native Representative Council and leader of the African Democratic Party, but even he seems to have acted on behalf of Orlando tenants in his negotiations with the squatters. Finally, it was also alleged that the Communist Party was 'active in supporting the Natives in their present attitude . . .'³⁹ but the South African Police did not give any credibility to Communist involvement in instigating the movements.⁴⁰ Mpanza was

³⁵ There is a copy of the memorandum in the *Xuma Papers*, ABX 470429. I must thank the Librarian of the University of the Witwatersrand for giving me access to these papers and permission to quote from them.

³⁶ Monongoaha is apparently not a patronymic but a sobriquet which refers to a 'one year contract'. This suggests that Monongoaha was at some stage a contract worker on the gold mines. I owe this information to Dr Jeff Guy, National University of Lesotho, who tried to trace Monongoaha on my behalf.

³⁷ *Bantu World*, 19 April 1947.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12 October 1946.

³⁹ JCC *Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, Annexure A, p. 18.

⁴⁰ *Police Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

strongly opposed to local black Communists, and reputedly used his influence to prevent them from being elected to the Advisory Board.⁴¹ His only link with the South African left was the fortuitous connexion with his attorney, Senator H. M. Basner.

IV

The common contemporary explanation for squatting was the coincidence of a serious housing shortage for blacks in Johannesburg with massive immigration from the rural areas. This was part of the explanation but not all of it and a complete explanation would need to explore at least three other major factors. First, while black families had been migrating to Johannesburg since before the turn of the century, a crisis was precipitated by the massive scale on which whole families, rather than work-seeking men, moved from the rural areas during the Second World War. Secondly, the scale of family migration in turn indicates severe dislocations in the rural economy, both in the reserves and on white farms. Thirdly, the wages of unskilled labourers in industry never reached the cost of family subsistence in Johannesburg, and while high levels of employment were maintained during the war, unemployment persisted through the period; after the war there was widespread open unemployment. Each of these factors needs to be considered in turn.

Between 1936 and 1946 the black population of Johannesburg increased by two thirds, from 229,122 to 384,628,⁴² and the major increase took place after the war broke out. The Johannesburg Municipality estimated that 57 per cent of this increase was the result of migration from the rural areas.⁴³ The evidence that complete family units were migrating is less easy to quantify, but the evidence, though impressionistic, is most suggestive. In its submission to the Commission of Inquiry into the Moroka disturbances, the Municipality reported that

recently there has been apparent a growing practice on the part of rural Natives entering the Urban areas to seek work and immediately to bring their wives and families with them. Formerly the labourer only brought his wife and family after he had been employed in the area for some years. The change in practice is due in some measure to the disparity between wages and living conditions as between the rural and Urban areas. Stories of high wages and more attractive living and social conditions are gaining increasing prevalence in the rural areas.⁴⁴

A black police constable who went to Natal on holiday in October 1946, told of 'men, women and children' on the train to Johannesburg, and of people gathered on Volksrust and Standerton stations 'with all their

⁴¹ *Moroka Disturbances*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴³ *JCC Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *JCC Supplementary Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

household goods.’⁴⁵ W. J. P. Carr, then Assistant Manager of the Johannesburg Native and Non-European Affairs Department, recalls men, women and children arriving in Johannesburg in every conceivable kind of conveyance.⁴⁶ Further evidence comes from the census returns from the camps which reveal a reasonable numerical balance between men and women, while children formed a considerable proportion of the squatter populations.⁴⁷

These accounts do not make it clear as to precisely when kin groups began migrating on a large scale. It is possible that the scale of family migration increased after the successes of Mpanza’s first movement. It is possible that black families suffering from rural poverty and landlessness took heart from stories that ‘Natives in Johannesburg are being given by the Municipality places to build their own homes or shacks’ which the holidaying constable reported hearing in Natal and on the farms in the Memel district of the Orange Free State.⁴⁸ The late dates of these accounts would suggest that it was later in the war, rather than earlier, that family migration took place on a large scale. On the other hand the stimulus to record these observations for posterity did not come until after the Moroka disturbances of August 1947.

The appearance in Johannesburg of black families in large numbers exacerbated the housing shortage. But squatting as a ‘problem’ clearly transcended a housing shortage. As a journalist on the local black newspaper, the *Bantu World* correctly observed, squatting had its origin in the land hunger of the reserves and the conditions on European farms. There were he wrote, ‘thousands of landless and homeless people in the Native areas. . . .’ and people were being evicted

by the thousands from European-owned farms because they failed to comply with the intolerable conditions imposed on them by the farmers. Congestion and abject poverty drive them out of the reserves. How can starving men and women remain where they cannot obtain food?⁴⁹

The writer concluded that the ‘problem of “shanty towns” cannot be solved by the enforcement of rigorous measures but by the revision of the Natives’ Land Policy.’

The general deterioration of the reserves had, of course, been evident long before the Second World War. During the early years of the war,

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80 (Annexure K).

⁴⁶ Interview with W. J. P. Carr, August 1977.

⁴⁷ A census of the breeze-block rooms in Jabavu taken between April and August 1946, revealed that there were 5,398 men, 5,332 women and 9,607 children living in 4,026 rooms. The number of families was estimated at 4,658, and the children at two per family. (JCC *Supplementary Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.) Another estimate suggested that on average there were just under five persons in each family. (JCC *Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, p. 70.)

⁴⁸ JCC *Supplementary Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, p. 80 (Annexure K).

⁴⁹ *Bantu World*, 29 September 1946.

however, several factors operated simultaneously to speed their decline. One such factor, not confined to the rural areas, was the rapid increase in the costs of the most important items of black subsistence. A study conducted in 1940 by researchers at the University of the Witwatersrand, suggested that the costs of necessary items of consumption had increased by between 20 and 30 per cent since before the war: mealie (maize) meal by 20 per cent, rice by 50 per cent, candles by 45 per cent, wood by 50 per cent, boermeal (coarse maize meal) by 25 per cent, paraffin by 25 per cent, and coal by 50 per cent.⁵⁰ To make matters worse, a serious shortage of maize developed from about 1941—a crucial problem, because ‘mealies’ could serve as a cheap substitute for bread. The shortage was in part the result of an over-optimistic forecast of production for the 1942 season, which led to undertakings for export which could only be met (because of drought the following season) by exporting local reserves. The same drought also caused a serious drop in maize production in the subsistence sector.⁵¹ One Transkei missionary estimated that the yields in 1942 were anything from a quarter to a seventh of the usual crop.⁵² The result, as one contemporary observer noted, was that:

men are travelling long distances in search of some store which can sell them their food. Most of them are far too poor to buy bread instead. Taken all together, they form a large percentage, possibly even half of the whole population.⁵³

The maize shortage seems to have persisted throughout the war years, and reached desperate proportions in 1946. An agricultural journal, the *Primary Producer* noted in 1945 that the original farm ration of ‘3 lb of maize meal per day has been reduced first of all to 2½ lb and now stands after further drastic reduction at 1½ lb *per diem*.’⁵⁴ The following year, it was reported that agricultural labourers’ rations were less than ¾ lb.⁵⁵ The *Bantu World* revealed that in certain regions white farmers were illegally selling mealie meal to ‘starving and desperate Africans at anything from £1.10.0 to £2.10.0 a bag’, double the controlled price of maize.⁵⁶ But if the rural areas were in such dire economic straits, then conditions in Johannesburg were not all that much better. In Johannesburg, people in search of mere survival were forced to brave the elements and the authorities by moving into the open veld.

In the years before the war, industry, and in particular the mining

⁵⁰ The study was undertaken by Paul Guneault of the Department of Economics and reported in the *South African Outlook*, July 1941, p. 139.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, March 1942, pp. 47–8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, September 1943, pp. 128–9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, March 1942, pp. 47–8.

⁵⁴ *Primary Producer*, 22 August 1945.

⁵⁵ *Farmer*, 18 January 1946.

⁵⁶ *Bantu World*, 13 April 1946.

industry had held wages below subsistence level because—so it was argued—part of family subsistence could be produced in the rural areas. The appearance of African families in the city suggests that the reserves were failing in this respect. A study of the mineworkers' strike of 1946 has suggested that the industrial action was at least partly a response to the failure of the subsistence sector to support mine-workers families in the reserves.⁵⁷ Wages for unskilled labourers in secondary industry were also below the level of family subsistence. Squatting was a response to a situation in which the costs of family subsistence had to be met entirely from wages, yet one in which wages were below the costs of subsistence. Squatting should be seen, then, as an attempt to reduce the costs of subsistence in a situation in which, because of the swollen 'reserve army' moving into the city, relatively unimpeded by influx controls, wages could be held down despite the rapid increase in living costs.

Before examining wages in detail, however, it should be noted that while new jobs opened up in Johannesburg and along the Reef as local manufacturers took advantage of the fall of imports from Britain and Europe, and as industry geared up to make the materials of war, unemployment was widespread. Moreover, in some sectors, a high level of employment was only achieved by lowering wages. Thus in 1940, the Manager of the Johannesburg NNEAD reported that unemployment was present particularly in the building industry, and added that 'most of the Natives who became unemployed have been able to find other employment, although not always at the remuneration previously received.'⁵⁸ The increase in the wages of unskilled workers from June 1942, in turn probably created some unemployment. According to the report of an inter-departmental inquiry under the chairmanship of Douglas Smit, the Secretary of the Union Department of Native Affairs:

We are now reaching the stage when minimum wages have been laid down for almost all unskilled labour in the larger industrial areas, and the initial effect of raising the wages of this class has been to bring about the reduction in the numbers employed through better organisation and the installation of machinery wherever possible.⁵⁹

At the end of the war, there was widespread unemployment amongst black workers in Johannesburg. In 1946, the Manager of the NNEAD reported that 'many hundreds of location tenants are seeking employment' and that

⁵⁷ D. O'Meara, 'The 1946 African Mineworkers' Strike in the Political Economy of South Africa' *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, July 1976, pp. 146–73.

⁵⁸ JCC *Mayor's Minute*, *op. cit.*, 1939–40, p. 194.

⁵⁹ *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Social, Health and Economic Condition of Urban Natives, 1942–43*, chairman Douglas Smit, Annexure 47—1943 (hereafter *Smit Committee*), p. 3.

it was 'fair to assume that some thousands of male Natives are unemployed'.⁶⁰ It would seem that many of these unemployed people lived in squatter camps. As noted earlier, more than half the people arrested in a police raid on the Tobruk camp in 1947 were out of work.⁶¹ Even during periods of high employment it is likely that many people were temporarily out of work.

Although it is difficult to determine with precision, there was probably an overall rise in wages in secondary industry during the war. Blacks in semi-skilled jobs were 'earning in many cases as much as £2.10s.0d. to £3. 10s. 0d. per week' in 1943.⁶² But the wages of unskilled workers, seldom, if ever, equalled the cost of subsistence of an average family of five. In 1940, under the Wage Board Agreement in force in Johannesburg, the rate for unskilled workers was 5½d. per hour—£4.19s.0d. per month for a 50-hour week.⁶³ The African Commercial and Distributive Workers' Union argued that 30s. a week was necessary for the subsistence of a labourer and his family, and an investigation conducted by Eileen Krige, Mabel Palmer and Ellen Hellman suggested that this was a conservative estimate: 'A Native family of five cannot subsist on less than £6.10s.0d. a month.'⁶⁴ During 1942, a Wage Board investigation into the earnings of 27,994 unskilled labourers in Johannesburg, including municipal workers, revealed that they received £5. 2s. 11d. a month, including the Government cost of living allowance. At this stage it was estimated that the 'amount required in Johannesburg to house, feed and clothe a Native family of five in decency' was £7. 14s. 6d.⁶⁵ In August 1942, a new Wage Board recommendation was gazetted which proposed a three-stage wage increase over eighteen months which would result in the unskilled labourers' wages eventually reaching £1. 7s. 0d. a week (£5. 1s. 0d. a month) by February 1944.⁶⁶ Even adding the Government cost of living allowance 8s. 8d. in 1942) does not bring the income of the fully employed labourer up to the cost of subsistence in 1942. Despite the fact that rate for daily paid workers was slightly higher, the position of daily paid workers was probably worse if it is assumed that they were intermittently unemployed.

In the £7. 14s. 6d. estimate of subsistence, the cost of rent, including water, sanitation, and other services, was £1. 5s. 0d. just under 20 per cent of subsistence.⁶⁷ It is likely that many workers living as tenants and sub-tenants in

⁶⁰ JCC *Supplementary Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–14.

⁶¹ *Moroka Disturbances*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁶² *Smit Committee*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁶³ *South African Outlook*, April 1940, p. 63.

⁶⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁵ *Smit Committee*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁶⁶ *Government Gazette* vol. CVXIX, No. 3084, Proclamation No. 1579.

⁶⁷ Social and Economic Planning Council, *Report No. 13: Economic and Social Conditions of the Racial Groups in South Africa*, U.G. 53–1948, p. 82.

Orlando were paying less, but probably not much less. Even so, it can be assumed that an unskilled labourer earning around £5.10s.0d. a month in 1944 might stand a better chance of maintaining himself and his family if he could find a way of housing himself at a much lower cost than hitherto, or better still, for nothing.

Aside from the cost of housing, however, black workers had another subsistence component to consider—transport. The 1942 Wage Board investigation which suggested that the cost of subsistence of a family of five was £7.14s.6d. in Johannesburg calculated that transport cost 6s.6d. a month—4.6 per cent of subsistence costs, or 6.3 per cent of the 1942 income of an unskilled labourer.⁶⁸ These estimates leave out of account the wide variations in transport costs. Transport would be proportionately cheaper in areas adjacent to the industrial areas like Sophiatown, Newclare, and Martindale, Eastern and Western Native Townships, than in areas further away like Orlando, Pimville and Alexandra, between 8 and 12 miles from the city. It was in these latter-named areas that the main squatting movements originated. Transport costs would have been even higher for people living in one of these areas and working further along the Reef. Transport costs may have weighed heavily as an incentive to squat—by saving on rent, the costs of getting to and from work might be met. The problem of meeting subsistence costs was the dominant issue in the politics of the urban black working class. There had been bus boycotts in Alexandra in 1940, 1942, 1943 and 1944. Squatting, bus boycotts, and rent strikes may all be seen as collective efforts by the black working class to change or hold the central components of subsistence existence in an industrial setting. It is likely that the most recent arrivals in Johannesburg settled in the areas most distant from the city. It was certainly in these areas that the main squatting movements originated. Only the small and ill-fated Newclare movement, which lasted barely a week before the police cleared it, originated in an area close to the city centre.

It is true that other factors also contributed to the prevalence of squatter movements taking place far from the city centre. For instance, regulations against unauthorized extensions to municipal housing were strictly enforced in Orlando, even at a stage when relaxation would have helped the Municipality to deal with squatting. Thus in February 1946, the City Council rejected a proposal by Orlando tenants that they should be permitted to build lean-to shacks onto their houses for the re-absorption of squatters.⁶⁹ On the other hand, the normal method of absorbing extra tenants in freehold areas like Sophiatown was to construct another backyard shack. This meant that housing capacity in the freehold areas,

⁶⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁹ JCC *Memorandum, op. cit.*, Annexure A, pp. 16–17.

though finite, was less bounded than in the Municipal locations. By contrast, the authorities, including the police, were probably quicker to take immediate and effective action against squatting in the city during the crucially important early stages. Whites would feel more threatened by the appearance of large numbers of squatters near the city than in remote locations.

The gap between wages and subsistence constantly exercised the authorities. Throughout the war, attempts were made to find some way of reducing the cost of housing as an alternative to increasing wages. Even before squatting began, the government instructed an inter-departmental committee to discover ways '*other than merely increasing wages* of improving the social and economic condition' of blacks in the urban areas.⁷⁰ A variety of schemes and ideas continued to circulate in official circles during and after the war.⁷¹ The Johannesburg City Council fully appreciated the relationship between subsistence costs, wages and the distribution of obligations to provide housing between public authorities and private interests. During 1946, a meeting of its Finance Committee heard a report which stated the problem in the clearest possible terms:

The burden of the cost of providing housing schemes . . . falls on the rate-payers of the City and the Government. The provision of this accommodation at low rentals has thus enabled the employers of labour to pay minimum wages to their workers, and for this reason they should be called upon to bear a proportion of the costs of any housing schemes erected by the Council for the benefit of the workers. The ideal solution of the problem would be the payment of economic wages to natives. . . . The alternative is the imposition of tax on employers.⁷²

Although the report erred in stating that the rate-payers and the Government bore the burden of housing costs, it accurately summarized the alternatives available to local authorities. But the Municipality had no power to tax industry, and it was not until Hendrik Verwoerd became Minister of Native Affairs in 1952 that this solution was imposed by the central government. Before 1948, secondary industry was prepared neither to pay higher wages nor to subsidize housing. As an editorial in the journal *South African Industry and Trade* made clear:

Prominent industrialists and financial authorities in Johannesburg are unanimously of the opinion that it is wholly impossible for industry to be saddled with an

⁷⁰ *Smit Committee, op. cit.*, p. 31. (Author's emphasis.)

⁷¹ 'There have been experiments in the construction of houses from new materials and in the use of Native labour for building, either under the Bloemfontein system [under which materials were loaned to blacks] or in departmental housing. Certain private contractors have also experimented with new types of houses requiring only unskilled Native labour. These experiments have as yet only touched the fringe of the housing shortage and the majority of houses within the Municipality have been erected at high cost.' (Social and Economic Planning Council *Report No. 13, op. cit.*, p. 10.)

⁷² JCC *Supplementary Memorandum, op. cit.*, pp. 37-8.

additional burden of making provision . . . for the housing of their Native employees, and yet retain their markets.⁷³

Although this statement was made in 1948, after the war-time boom was over and a hostile government was in power, it seems to reflect prevailing opinion in industry during the war years.

Given these constraints, the reduction of housing construction costs was the only alternative which the Council could envisage. After the war a scheme was introduced by the Central Organisation of Technical Training (the so-called COTT scheme) whereby black artisans would be trained and put to work on the construction of location housing. The Municipality supported the scheme, but the white building unions opposed it except on the condition that the black labour should be paid at the same rates as white artisans. The Municipality lost interest in the scheme under those conditions and it was dropped. It was only attractive if it promised to reduce costs significantly.⁷⁴

So far, it has been suggested that the assumption that the squatter movements simply originated in a housing shortage does not stand up to closer scrutiny. Certainly there was a critical housing shortage in Johannesburg, exacerbated during the war, and the pressure on housing must undoubtedly have counted as a factor contributing towards squatting. But this shortage had endured for as long as blacks had been settling in the city. The roots of the crisis lay in the same general conditions which gave rise to squatting: the abysmal poverty of blacks in the city, their political disabilities, and the restrictions imposed on their access to accommodation in the city, particularly the inner city.

Aside from the limitation on the areas in which blacks were permitted to purchase land and to live, an important constraint on municipal housing was that the costs should be paid out of the 'Native Revenue Account', an account into which rents, profits from services, and above all, profits from the municipal monopoly over the brewing of 'kaffir' beer were paid. Before 1934, no sub-economic housing for blacks was built in the urban areas. In effect, the poorest class in the urban community, whose wages barely covered the costs of subsistence, bore the major costs of their housing. Although deficits were common, they were small and it was a general rule that housing for blacks should not be a cost on general revenue.

In Johannesburg, municipal parsimony should be understood in terms of the limited financial base for revenues; in broader terms, it reflected the power of the great interests, particularly mining, over the city. City finances

⁷³ 'Industry cannot bear the cost of Native Housing', *South African Industry and Trade*, December 1948, p. 65.

⁷⁴ Cf., for instance, 'Construction of Native Housing by Native Labour', *South African Builder*, February 1946, pp. 21-3 and 'Housing: Natives at last to be trained to build for themselves', *op. cit.*, October 1946, pp. 11-13.

were drawn from two main sources: rates on the capital value of land and revenue derived from services. Except *qua* property owners in the city, the great interests centred in Johannesburg did not contribute directly to the city's finances. Mining land was not, and is still not, subject to rates. Thus the major source of city revenue came from direct taxation . . . (a housing rate) on the city's middle classes and (as rent) on its working classes.

Moreover, insofar as it bore on housing for blacks, the machinery of municipal government was seriously deficient before the Second World War. The Native and Non-European Affairs Department was only formed in 1928. Prior to that date, housing for blacks was administered under the Parks and Recreation Department vote, along with the Zoo. While the senior officials appointed to the Department were perhaps competent and dedicated in a paternalistic way to the well-being of their subjects, their scope for action was severely hampered by lack of money, limited statutory powers, conflicts with other departments, inertia and sometimes more than a hint of corruption in municipal government.⁷⁵ Officials were also hampered by political interference, usually mounted on behalf of the interests of landlords. Several major scandals resulted from the pressures these interests were able to bear on the NNEAD and other municipal departments. For instance, the opposition of landlords retarded the supply of water to Sophiatown;⁷⁵ the New Doornfontein Stand Owners' Association delayed the removal of blacks living in the back yards of New Doornfontein to Orlando in 1935. The Commission which investigated this matter drew the drolly ambiguous conclusion that not *all* the members of the Native Affairs Committee had received payment from the Association.⁷⁷

Before the war, the major preoccupation of Municipal officials concerned with housing was to try and enforce 'slum' clearance and health regulations. But given the slow production of housing for blacks, this effort developed into a war of attrition against the city's poor. According to the Murray-Thornton Commission of 1935, the Public Health Committee's attention had been drawn as far back as 1926 to the 'uselessness of demolishing existing slums, without providing *pari passu* other and proper accommodation for the dispossessed occupants . . .', and that if 'specific rehousing and proper supervision do not accompany clearance, the effect of closing one slum will be . . . merely to intensify another slum next door.'⁷⁸ Successive commissions had drawn attention to the overcrowded and insanitary conditions in the townships and the freehold areas. The Stallard

⁷⁵ Report of the Commission of Inquiry: *Johannesburg Public Health and Native Affairs Department*, 1935, Commissioners John Murray and Sir Edward Newberry Thornton (hereafter *Murray-Thornton Commission*), passim.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Commission of 1921 described some of them in the following terms: 'Brown's yard . . . contains about 40 small rooms, all occupied by Native families. . . . Makapan's yard, 45 small rooms . . . White Star Trolley yard . . . 40 rooms occupied by Native and Cape families. . . .'⁷⁹ These conditions were duplicated in varying degrees in the freehold areas of Sophiatown, Newclare and Martindale, within the municipal boundaries, and Alexandra beyond the city's borders.

The initiation in 1932 of Orlando, hailed by a reporter on the *Bantu World* as the 'future great city of Bantudom' and destined to be 'greater than Zimbabwe'⁸⁰ promised some relief, not only in the freehold areas, but also in the older municipal locations of Pimville and Eastern and Western Native Townships. Of course, the benefits of improved housing have to be balanced against the longer distances, the architectural uniformity, the social dislocation, and the increased regimentation. As the *Bantu World* was quick to add to its prospectus: 'what of the pinpricks, of the Police raids and the harsh regulations that obtain in townships built solely for black folks?'⁸¹ Blacks preferred living in the freehold areas within the municipal boundaries, notwithstanding their crowded conditions, to the bleaker and more regimented conditions in the locations.⁸² Despite these preferences there seems to have been little resistance by the inhabitants of Prospect Township (close to the city centre) to their removal to Orlando in 1938.

The development of Orlando temporarily relieved the housing crisis, but by 1935, the Murray-Thornton Commission observed that there was an urgent need for at least 1,000 additional new dwellings in the locations. 'It is probable that even this number may have to be increased if Johannesburg is to be kept in a reasonable sanitary condition . . .'⁸³ The housing situation was critically bad before the war broke out in 1939, but it had improved sufficiently to induce a degree of complacency in the authorities, pre-occupied anyway with preventing deficits. The Manager of the NNEAD reported in 1940 that 'The Native section of the Department is in an extremely healthy financial position; so much so that it is entirely self-supporting and does not cost the ratepayers anything.'⁸⁴ Indeed so satisfied were the City Fathers with the situation that rents in Orlando were reduced in 1940.

A review of the number of inhabitants and houses in Johannesburg locations (including Alexandra) in 1940 reveals the following situation:

⁷⁹ Report of the *Local Government Commission*, 1921, TP 21-1922, p. 46.

⁸⁰ *Bantu World*, 16 September 1933.

⁸¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁸² *Moroka Disturbances*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁸³ *Murray-Thornton Commission*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁸⁴ *JCC Mayor's Minute*, *op. cit.*, 1939-40, p. 193.

<i>Location</i>	<i>Estimated Population</i>	<i>Housing Units</i>	<i>Average Occupancy/ Housing unit</i>
Eastern Native Township	4,300	616	6.98
Western Native Township	15,000	2,227	6.46
Orlando	35,000	5,891	5.94
Pimville	12,000	2,312	6.27
Alexandra (in 1939)	35,000	2,500	14.00
		stands	per stand

The housing stock and populations were much the same in 1939 and 1940. About 10 per cent of houses in Eastern Native Township and Western Native Township, and 30 per cent in Orlando were three-roomed dwellings; the rest were two-roomed, with a few single rooms in Western Native Township. Most houses in Pimville were 'native'-owned, and presumably 'native'-constructed, plus 99 'tanks' (literally, water-tanks sliced lengthways down the middle) and a small number of municipally-owned units of unspecified dimensions. In Alexandra, houses were built of brick, corrugated iron, or mud. No estimate is available as to the number of dwellings on a stand.⁸⁵ Conditions varied considerably. Pimville was probably the worst. Begun in 1904 as an emergency shelter for people evacuated from the city after an outbreak of the plague, much of its accommodation had been condemned again and again, but left to stand because of the lack of alternative housing. Aside from the shortage of housing, other services were also inadequate. In Pimville, there were 63 water taps and 63 drains to serve an estimated population of 15,000.⁸⁶ Eastern Native Township was in this respect positively opulent by comparison: the number of taps was only one fewer than the number of houses. On the other hand, overcrowding in Eastern Native Township was worse than in any other area.

From the beginning of the war, and particularly from about 1943, the housing shortage became more acute. The construction of new housing first declined, and then stopped: 750 houses were built in 1941 and 1942; while none at all were built in 1943 and 1944.⁸⁷ Under pressure of the crisis, the Municipality allowed tenants in Orlando to take in sub-tenants. Judging from the difference in numbers between the 'estimated' population (recorded above) and the 'official' population, there were about 8,000 unregistered sub-tenants in the locations. By 1944, the waiting list for houses had grown to 16,000.

It was from among the sub-tenants that the majority of the first group of

⁸⁵ JCC *Mayor's Minute*, *op. cit.*, 1939-40, pp. 199-200; JCC Native and Non-European Affairs Department, *Survey of Reef Locations and those of Evaton, Meyerton, Nigel*, Pretoria, Vereeniging, May 1939, p. 199.

⁸⁶ JCC *Mayor's Minute*, *op. cit.*, 1939-40, p. 199.

⁸⁷ JCC *Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

squatters were drawn. It is likely that a significant number of them were recent arrivals in town. But it is likely that a very large proportion of squatters had been settled in town for some time, particularly those who came from Pimville and Alexandra. Indeed, on the basis of the estimate that 57 per cent of the increase in population between 1936 and 1946 were from outside the area, then something like 30,000 people came into the city. The lowest estimate of the number of squatters was 60,000 and the highest 90,000. It is likely that between half and three-quarters of the squatters were not newcomers to Johannesburg.

One of the political conditions for the emergence and relative successes of the squatter movements lay in the divisions of interest between different authorities within the country. Until early 1947 the central government was reluctant to act decisively against the squatters by bringing its considerable force to bear against the black home-seekers. Despite continuous appeals from the Johannesburg Municipality, the central government exhibited a lack of interest which at times amounted to connivance in squatting. Much of the exaggeration which crept into Municipal assessments of the dangers of squatting can be explained by their feeling that the central authorities were not doing enough about the matter. Thus at an interview with the Ministers of Native Affairs and of Justice, Councillor M. J. Green argued that 'conciliatory methods were of no avail in handling the Natives'⁸⁸ and Brian Porter, later Town Clerk of Johannesburg, said the feeling had 'arisen among Natives as the result of certain Press reports that the Government was not supporting the Council.'⁸⁹ While it is unlikely that stronger action against squatting by the central government would have produced the effect which the Municipality sometimes naively hoped for of eliminating squatting, tougher action would certainly have impelled the movements to move in a different trajectory from the one they took.

Underlying these divisions between central and local government lay an important difference of interests. Secondary industry, intent on taking advantage of a more mobile labour force, exercised considerable influence on the central government, though it was by no means dominant in the array of interests on which the government depended for its support. The influence of industry on government policy was noticeable in the relatively lax application of influx control regulations. The Government's attitude towards squatters and squatting movements was strongly influenced by industry's need for labour. In this regard, it is instructive to recall the fate of the group of squatters who settled on Alberton commonage during 1946, and who were simply removed by the Union Department of Native Affairs to Hammanskraal, beyond Pretoria. The reason given for this action was

⁸⁸ JCC *Memorandum*, *op. cit.*, Annexure A, p. 31.

⁸⁹ *Loc. cit.*

that most were unemployed and 'their removal therefore caused no economic dislocation.'⁹⁰

The Johannesburg Municipality sometimes referred rather wistfully to the Alberton squatters as an instance of how simple the solution to squatting could be if the Union Government would act with resolution.⁹¹ But in fact the central authorities would act decisively only if they could do so without jeopardizing the supply of labour to industry. Its position can be summarized in the statement it made in rejecting a request from Johannesburg to remove Pimville squatters, at around the same time as it took action against the Alberton group: 'To do so would be to remove the individuals from their livelihood . . .'⁹²

The political constituency of the City Council were the ratepayers of Johannesburg. Given the small scale of financial assistance for black housing from the central government, and the reluctance of industry to share the burden of any deficits arising from the Native Revenue Account which might arise from producing housing for workers in the Reef towns as well as Johannesburg, Municipal fears that the squatters would get a foothold are understandable enough. For this reason Johannesburg constantly sought to have squatting treated as a national problem.⁹³

The Labour Party won the Municipal elections of 1945 but its policy on squatting was little different from the Rate-payers' Association which had preceded it in power. The influence of mining house interest on policy towards black accommodation is difficult to ascertain. Mining made little direct contribution to city revenue, and arguably had an interest in keeping expenditure down lest it be forced to pay rates. At that stage, moreover, mining had little interest in a laissez faire labour policy, though some interests within mining were later to pursue such a policy as they diversified their investments into secondary industry. Later, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer made a contribution of £3,000,000 to the Municipality which provided a powerful impetus in housing Johannesburg's black population.

V

The 'disturbances at Moroka' of September 1947 in which three white policemen were killed when they tried to prevent the destruction of trading stores in Moroka do not form a central part of this account. But the specific nature of the disturbances alert one to the immensely important developments which were taking place in greater Johannesburg as the result of the massive increase in the number of black families, and the fact that these families were located far from the freehold areas or the city centre. But the

⁹⁰ *Moroka Disturbances, op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁹¹ *JCC Memorandum, op. cit.*, Annexure A, p. 48.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

squatter movements do bear on these developments, in that they had successfully exploited the precarious opportunities presented during the war to establish a viable community on Johannesburg's southern boundaries. The consolidation of families made possible through squatting meant the extension of an urban community requiring educational, health, and other services if they were to fulfil the function of providing labour for the new engines of commerce and industry. The rapid growth of this community contributed to profound changes in the structure of city government, and indeed national politics—a story which cannot be taken up here. Of the services needed by this great community, Africans were effectively debarred from independently providing all but one: trading.

In the areas to the south-west of Johannesburg, unlike most other areas, black entrepreneurs dominated small trading. The history of trading in the new community is closely inter-woven with squatting for, as we have seen, as Mpanza encamped with his ragged army in their hessian shelters, he sold 'licences' for trading. This was one of the instances of 'lawlessness' which incensed the Municipality, and it tried to break his control over trading by issuing municipal licences in Moroka. It seems reasonable to assume that amongst the crowd of 200 or so which destroyed the licensed traders' stalls some were acting on behalf of the deposed illegal traders. Beneath the struggle between legal and illegal traders it is possible to see in shadowy outline a series of conflicts which have continued ever since. The intervention of the authorities in trading had a decisive effect on the economic opportunities of particular individuals. But the decision to give licences to 'illegal' traders with contacts with wholesalers, while hitting at the power of the squatter leaders, had wider implications. It also dealt a severe blow at that class of independent traders capable of drawing on supplies from other sources—from the so called 'informal' sector, from subsistence producers, and from criminal sources. The significance of insisting on connexions with wholesalers, as well as other criteria (preference was given to people who had capital, could read, write, and keep financial records) forced African traders to become a subordinate element in Johannesburg commerce. Trading offered an opportunity for individuals to escape the fate of the common labourer, if not from a life of poverty. The establishment of Municipal control over trading placed the Municipality in a strategic position to manipulate the African trading class, and hence to consolidate its control over the south-western areas. White commercial interests, too, adequately represented in the City Council, have benefited ever since from these decisions. Up to the present, black entrepreneurs have continued in a subordinate and dependent role in the political economy of the city.

VI

By the early 1950s, the squatting camps had been destroyed and their

populations absorbed into the vast municipal housing schemes beyond 'white' Johannesburg's southern boundaries. Though squatting has continued in and around the city on a diminished scale, and on a larger scale in Reef towns, it has never reached the same proportions or significance as the movements considered here. But squatting has continued in and around other South African cities, notably Durban, Cape Town, East London, and Port Elizabeth, and massive squatting communities have established themselves in the rural areas of the Transvaal on the peripheries of industrial development north-west of Pretoria.⁹⁴ The persistence of squatting, despite the efforts of the state to eliminate it, sometimes by ruthless measures like bull-dozing squatter shacks, is testimony to the determination of people drafted into the industrial work-force to achieve *de facto* ownership of land in the vicinity of industrial development.

Although the specific circumstances of other squatter camps differ from the movements discussed here, this study might help to understand the struggles in which the working class in other areas have been involved in establishing themselves as a community. Squatting is sometimes viewed rather narrowly as a strategy in achieving certain housing objectives. While this perspective is useful and important, it is equally important to uncover the significance of squatting in the political struggles of the working class, and to seek out connexions between squatting and other forms of working class action directed at solving subsistence issues: industrial action, transport boycotts, and food riots, as well as in the development of support for wider political movements.

⁹⁴ See for instance, Graaf, J. and Weichel, J., 'Employment Survey of Black Workers living in Crossroads', Urban Problems Research Unit, South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), June 1978; Maree, J. and Cornell, J., 'Sample Survey of Squatters in Crossroads, December, 1977', Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) Working Paper No. 17, January, 1978; Maree, J. and Cornell, J., 'Employment Survey of Black Workers living in Crossroads', Urban Problems Research Unit, SAIRR, June 1978; Maasdorp, G. (ed) *From Shantytown to Township: an economic study of African poverty and rehousing in a South African City*, Cape Town: Juta, 1975; G. Maasdorp, 'Alternatives to the bull-dozer; an economic approach to squatter housing with lessons for South Africa', University of Natal Department of Economics, (Occasional Paper No. 6), 1977; SAIRR, *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa*, 1977, pp. 438-56, and *ibid.*, 1978, pp. 351-5.