

AN APPEAL FOR SOLIDARITY

November, 17, 1977, Festival of Solidarity with the Fourth World, Mutualité Conference Centre, Paris

AN APPEAL TO THE GOVERNMENT

It is to the national government that I appeal first. To the government, whose first mission is to show a real determination to set in motion the political machinery to eradicate poverty. To the government, which the public, since World War II, has made increasingly responsible for the protection of people who live in poverty. This kind of general political indifference leads the government in its turn to load its responsibility onto the minister for social affairs. And what can he do but refer the matter to his Department for Social Action?

The result of this avoidance of responsibility is that people living in poverty are isolated, without recourse, facing authorities that hold full power over the lives of people who are unprotected because they can neither speak up for themselves nor have any political representation. Which members of the government have publicly declared themselves to be responsible for or in solidarity with these people? When has extreme poverty ever been the subject of debate by the government?

Nevertheless, the delegations we have heard this evening have told us repeatedly how unbearable and unjust it is to be ignored, to be kept on the fringe of society, and to see their destitution dealt with only by administrative procedures, instead of having it wiped out through the will and cooperation of all.

With this in mind, what do we demand from the government?

First, we expect that the head of our government publicly recognize that he represents and defends the interests of unrepresented minorities; we want him to see to it, as soon as possible, that people who live in extreme poverty get the means for their socio-economic, cultural, and political freedom. He must above all ensure that they are represented in all forums where other citizens can make themselves heard.

What else do we demand from the government?

We demand that, to ensure this outcome under the best conditions, the head of our government appoint at the highest level a delegate who would permanently monitor and evaluate the formulation and execution of a five-year plan to wipe out poverty and all forms of exclusion in French democracy. We will not give a detailed account this evening of all our requests for legislation, executive orders, enactment, and special regulations. Since the creation of ATD Fourth World twenty years ago, it has worked to improve existing legislation, and this justifies the case for further reform. What we insist on tonight is a dialogue with the government, with which ATD has always been ready to share its experience and knowledge. Such a dialogue will break the vicious circle of poverty.

And finally we demand that the government welcome and support the voluntary efforts made by ordinary people in their fight against exclusion, and that, if necessary, it supply funds for non-governmental action. If the government supports the people's freedom to introduce changes, it will prove that the system works and guarantee that public institutions have the capacity for reform; it will give the government the opportunity to work out a new form of democracy that will no longer allow unrepresented minorities to be reduced to silence and destitution.

AN APPEAL TO THE ALLIES OF ATD

I appeal not only to the government but to all citizens, for it is they who finally determine the choices and objectives of any democratic society. Confronted with exclusion, people living in poverty remind us that a new ALLIANCE must be made: an ALLIANCE between the EXCLUDED and the INCLUDED in society.

This alliance must transform political life, change the ideas of our time, give a new spirit to our institutions and laws, and revive religious life.

We must therefore bring about a new alliance with people who live in poverty, in order to defend the cause of rejected people everywhere.

To be true to such an alliance we will fight to the end in our campaign against any social planning that excludes people who live in poverty, and we will insist on their participation in every situation. For, to fight the battle to the end, we must denounce anything that makes a person feel inferior and rejected.

- We will lead a campaign in our own families and social circles, even at the risk of giving up any comfortable ideas or privileges we may have.
- We will lead a campaign in the schools and colleges our children go to; we will not tolerate the neglect of the least gifted child or of the child crushed by the weight of his family's poverty.
- We will campaign in businesses and demand admittance for people who have no job training. In these critical times, we will see to it that they are not the first to lose their jobs and that workers' solidarity fully supports them.
- Such a campaign will lead us to fight for excluded people in the organisations, associations, groups, and clubs that we belong to. In short, we will no longer accept that people in poverty be forgotten or neglected anywhere.

If we join a political party, we will reorient its policy toward a society without outcasts. We will influence the government to adopt a social plan in defence of people who live in poverty and in respect for their rights.

As for followers of specific religions, let them act so that their dynamism and faith will lead our churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples to be the first to welcome people who struggle against the yoke of poverty. Haven't these institutions for centuries been places of prayer and of revolt against ignorance and war, against poverty, against the domination of the powerful? Let them become again, thanks to these believers, places of welcome for the unprotected, the uneducated, and those who suffer; places of hope for them, places of sharing, places to cast aside power, and also to witness God's refusal to accept oppression, injustice, and hatred.

Our action in the campaign against war and starvation and disregard for human rights will reinforce our refusal to accept any form of exclusion; for exclusion is actually the last stage of persecution against human dignity and against the respect owed to all human beings.

Moreover, if we can, we will devote more time to sharing our knowledge of reading, writing, scholarship, art, poetry, and music with people who have been deprived of them for so long.

That is why those of us who are educators or teachers will join members of ATD who are opening Street Libraries and running cultural action centres. Those of us who are sociologists, economists, or psychologists will participate in the research that the ATD institute has been carrying out for the last fifteen years to create a body of scientific knowledge about the conditions of extreme poverty. Those of us who are involved in the justice system will join and strengthen the committees that defend the rights and interests of people who often do not have access to any justice at all. Those of us who are elected officials, or those responsible in any way for solidarity among citizens will do our utmost to give people in poverty their rightful place as social partners in all national institutions. Those of us who are nurses and doctors will take up the defence of patients whose interests are

often ignored. Those of us who are writers and journalists will try to use language understandable by the least educated, and will denounce social exclusion.

All of us, without exception, can and must give our financial support. All of us will take the commitments of ATD into account and give all we can in our advocacy, our justice, and our love. We will choose to join an often thankless struggle against poverty; and we will denounce all situations that treat people as inferior.

Thus our campaign will indicate the determination of the whole country to eradicate the conditions of extreme poverty.

AN APPEAL TO ATD'S FULL-TIME VOLUNTEER CORPS

The struggle to liberate people from the oppression of poverty depends on you, ATD Volunteer Corps members, for it was you who were there from the beginning of our movement. Without your initiative, the families we knew in shantytowns, trailers, and emergency housing projects would never have taken part in contemporary history; they would have remained "problem families." It is you who have brought hope to a world where happiness itself was intimidating. However, giving a place in history to families in poverty demands your steadfast commitment and compels ATD never to go back on its word.

In the face of the wind and the tide; in the face of the indifference of the government; in the face of the lack of understanding in institutions; in the face of the apathy of public opinion; in the face of the scorn of many people; and, for many long years, in the face of rejection by families overwhelmed by distress, you have helped to create this movement.

Today some people at the bottom of the social ladder are beginning to rise up; activists are coming from their ranks. Henceforth the part you play will have to be more and more a political one. But you must also penetrate still more deeply into places that hide people who have been recently outcast, and you must always be on the look-out for any others who are forgotten. The main purpose of our movement will always be to eliminate the conditions of extreme poverty, whatever form they may take. We will go on preparing with people who have been excluded so they can reunite with the other world. But how is it possible to join the unknown? How is it possible to join a society whose history has separated us from it? It is up to you, the full-time volunteers of ATD, to continue being a gate in the wall of exclusion. You are fully recognized citizens, and you have joined the outcasts of our society. You have made the journey the other way around from them, and you will keep on making it with any newly outcast people until no one is left out.

You have chosen to share your lives with populations that have been left behind. You are and you will be witnesses in their midst that their hopes are not in vain, that they are not guilty but, on the contrary, that their experience is of value for all people. You are, and you will be at the very heart of the scandal. You will be involved as before with its victims, and you will denounce all wretchedness — if necessary, standing up against the government and public opinion. You have to find and gather allies around any excluded group of people. You have to get training for the struggle and for solidarity. You have to transmit what people in poverty have taught you about what injures them and what makes them progress. You are reference points, and you gather people around you. It is you who discover new fields where action should be undertaken and the new forms of struggle necessary to carry it out. You guarantee that outcasts will be the first ones to profit by changes, and that the changes will be radical enough to leave nobody out. You must promise to fight to the bitter end and guarantee that the people who are furthest behind will not be abandoned on the way. Because if you don't, who will guarantee that those who move ahead lead and encourage those who are too weakened by years of poverty?

By dedicating our lives to the elimination of poverty, we are and will be the witnesses of a society living in solidarity with people who suffer from it every day.

It is a life contract that we have signed. We have accepted the burden and the risks of it, and all the deprivation as well, for the success of our cause depends on the rise of this people, and on our own disappearance to give way to its leaders.

AN APPEAL TO THE ACTIVISTS AND DELEGATES OF PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN POVERTY

Activists and delegates of people who live in poverty, I now appeal to you. You, more than anyone, are concerned with decisions that will be made about you and your children. You refuse to live without hope, you refuse to be considered responsible for your suffering, and you refuse to be treated as if you did not exist or as if you were useless, and that has inspired our movement. Indeed, what is that movement if not the expression of your revolt, and also of your cry for help. Nevertheless, you know that nobody will set you free without your own effort. You have been let down so many times. You know that the other society has neither the same interests, nor the same ideas, nor the same plans as you. That is why you are and will be the first to be responsible for your empowerment and for the changes in your lives.

And for you to be responsible, you must first continue to learn, to get training, and take opportunities to meet and consider your situation together. You must demand a school that is able to educate your children, and a job that gives you independence and guarantees your family a decent life.

You must also demand vocational training suited to your background, together with the means for cultural and spiritual activity. So that your families may gain respect, that your children continue to know your love and be brought up by you, we will aim, for the next ten years, to wipe out illiteracy. You must aim not only to improve school attendance, but also to guarantee success for each child at school.

Undoubtedly we need the help of others to achieve these goals, but we can also do our share. Let those of you who know how to read and write teach your neighbours. Let each of us be responsible for our vocational training and also for that of our whole group. Let us enroll for training courses, and let us encourage our adult children to pursue vocational training. To assume responsibility, you will join family associations, parent-teacher associations, tenants' associations, trade unions, and political parties. You, too, are entitled to fight for justice, peace, and human rights. To assume responsibility means participating in the principal struggles of humanity. You will participate in these struggles on equal terms and you will instigate the fight against poverty. We cannot bring much formal education, we cannot bring gold or silver, but we have something that no one else has and that they need to know about — our experience of being outcasts.

We know what freedom is better than anyone else, for we have always been dependent on other people's decisions. As far as equality is concerned, we know how little we have of it, we who are treated as parasites and inferior human beings. We who live under the weight of scorn know the price of being a human being. We have experienced everything that humiliates a person, a family, and a neighbourhood, and if we join in other struggles, it will be to make everybody aware of people who live in extreme suffering, defeat, wretchedness, and despair.

CONCLUSION

Therefore I invite you tonight to form an alliance between those of you who live in poverty and those who don't; an alliance between accepted and unaccepted citizens; an alliance that must change relationships between people, in political life, and in the thinking of our time. It is a real contract that I want you to conclude between yourselves tonight, an agreement between people who live in poverty, the government, and other members of society. What is at stake in this agreement is the creation of a democracy that learns from the lessons of its own injustice toward neglected people and restores to them their responsibilities as citizens.

