

## CENSORSHIP ON THE RETREAT

by Christopher Merrett

President F. W. de Klerk's 2 February 1990 speech to the opening session of Parliament contained important implications for the University Library. The unbanning of the ANC, PAC and the SACP, and the unbanning and delisting of 175 of their supporters, enabled the library to abolish its "Banned-3" and "Banned-4" categories overnight and return to general circulation material which has been locked up for decades. Among many writers involved are Alex La Guma, Helen Joseph, Ruth First and Harold Wolpe. Some of their work is currently on display in the Main Library foyer.

Well before these measures were announced subscriptions had been placed for *Sechaba* (ANC) and *African Communist* (SACP) in the interests of a free flow of information in an era of *glasnost* and negotiation. Copies of these periodicals will be held in the Short Loan Collection.

Amendments to the Emergency regulations also suggested that the Library's ability to deliver information to its users would improve in future. The media regulations relating to the printed word have been abolished, as has the power to restrict individuals. Most restrictees were prevented from communicating information and ideas via any media.

These reforms represent an undoubted setback for the State security apparatus in which its power to control ideas and information has been considerably lessened. At the same time most of the Library's banned book collection remains intact, condemned to a locked cupboard by the Publications Act. In our case this amounts to over 200 titles mainly in the disciplines of History, Political Studies, English, Fine Arts and Psychology. The greatest irony of the present situation lies in the fact that while Nelson Mandela addresses the nation at mass rallies, and through the SABC, his published work is locked in banned book cupboards, and cannot be bought legally in bookshops.

Other forms of statutory censorship remain in force, while powers under the Internal Security Act will continue to encourage self-censorship of various types. A small amount of space has been created for academic freedom, but the struggle for its fulfillment still has a long road to travel. Lessening the impact of censorship on academic work is one of the urgent tasks facing the University of Natal in the 1990s.

## PLG TALKS TO THE FUND FOR FREE EXPRESSION

In March of this year, Progressive Librarians Guild members Peter McDonald and Elaine Harger called on the Fund for Free Expression (FFE) to discuss the Fund's endorsement of the Wedgeworth/Drew report *The Starvation of Young Black Minds*. We met with Executive Director Sophie Silberberg at the Fund's Fifth Avenue office overlooking the front steps of the main facility of the New York Public Library.

While the meeting was cordial, little of substance was accomplished in part because Ms. Silberberg said she could not speak on behalf of the FFE Board. She did say, however, that Board members had been divided over the request of the American Association of Publishers' request that the FFE fund the Wedgeworth/Drew trip to South Africa. She suggested that PLG write a letter to the Fund's board (on which Robert Wedgeworth sits) and present our position (which is clearly set forth elsewhere in this journal). Ms. Silberberg said she would pass the letter on to the full board at their April 15th meeting for discussion.

As it turned out, this apparently was not really the Executive Director's intention. When she had our letter in hand, she decided not to present it to the board as a whole but to a committee which duly decided "it will not be discussed at the full meeting of the board." In her letter of response dated May 18th, she never mentions who sat on this committee, but said in a phone conversation that it consisted of a few individuals interested in the issue.

Not to be outdone, PLG circumvented this wall of intransigence and mailed the original letter off to members of the Fund's board directly, with a cover letter. No response has been received to date, but doubtless the board's next meeting will have some small measure of *new* business to handle.

Reported by Peter McDonald