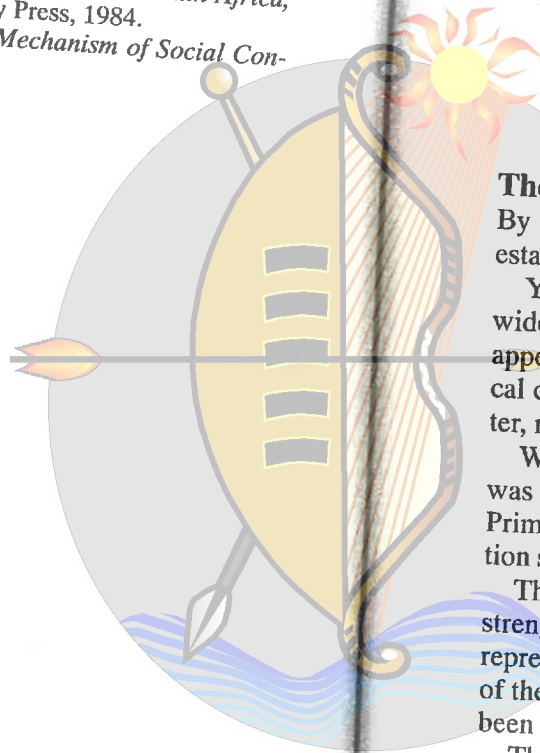


## The ANC's Campaign Against Bantu Education

- Davenport, T.R.H. *South Africa: A Modern History*. Johannesburg, MacMillan, 1981.
- Dugard, J. *Fragments of My Fleece*. Pietermaritzburg, Kendall and Strachan, 1985.
- Hlope, S.S. 'The Crisis of Urban Living Under Apartheid Conditions: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Soweto' in Murray, M.J. (ed). *South African Capitalism and Black Political Opposition*. Cambridge, Mass., Schenkman, 1982.
- Kane-Berman, J. *South Africa: The Method in the Madness*. London, Pluto, 1979.
- Lewis, J. *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924-55*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Mathonsi, E.N. *Black Matriculation Results: A Mechanism of Social Control*. Johannesburg, Skotaville, 1988.



### The ANC School Boycott: 1955 to 1956

By the early 60s, the Bantu Education system had been securely established throughout the country.

Yet during the period in which it was being set up, sufficiently widespread resistance to the policy had arisen for this outcome to have appeared far from a foregone conclusion. The dire material and political consequences of the new policy, as outlined in the previous chapter, made such resistance almost inevitable.

Why was the state so successful in implementing its policy? Why was Dr Verwoerd, as Minister of Native Affairs until 1958, and later Prime Minister from 1958 to 1966 able to bring into being an education system that accorded so well with his 'Grand Apartheid' designs?

These questions cannot be answered simply with reference to the strengthened position of the state in the 60s, following its successful repression of oppositional political movements and the development of the economic boom. Most of the resistance to Bantu Education had been subdued well before the end of the 50s.

The most vigorous campaign of popular resistance to Bantu Education was the ANC's school boycott from 1955 to 1956. This involved not only keeping large numbers of students out of primary school, but also the establishment of 'Cultural Clubs'. These were, effectively, alternative schools, set up through a body called the African Education Movement (AEM). Despite its considerable achievements, the campaign eventually collapsed for reasons which throw much light on the dynamics of educational conflict in South Africa.

First, a striking feature of the campaign, considered in the light of later events, was its inability to evoke a mass political movement of youth. The social conditions of the 50s generated a 'gangster' urban

Second, although the cultural clubs constituted a bold attempt to break the state stranglehold on education, the initiative lacked the resources to sustain itself. The AEM was unable to provide the material resources for alternative schooling for more than a tiny proportion of black youth. The attempt to sustain alternative schooling over a long period of time became even more unrealistic. Moreover, sectors of the ANC themselves developed unrealistic expectations of the possibility of sustaining educational alternatives on a large scale outside the state system. This hampered the AEM in developing a workable policy.

Third, the capacity of the state to provide a mass education system drew the mass of urban youth and their parents into the new system. This fatally undermined the attempt of the ANC to build opposition to government policy through a strategy based outside the state system. Because Bantu Education schools could provide some form of child care and educational certification, they were sufficiently attractive for the large majority of black parents. Bantu Education's triumph was that it increased the availability of educational provision. Township parents overcame their scruples about its ideological content and impoverished material character.

Conventional accounts of Bantu Education fail to deal with its astounding success in drawing black youth into a new educational order. This is not to say it attained much popular support at a political level.

The building of vast townships in the 50s was not only a defeat of battles by dwellers in inner city slums to hold on to their localities. It was *also* an attempt to contain the pressures of mass squatter movements and attendant discontent. Equally, Bantu Education was *not only* about the crushing of ideological diversity in the schools. It was also part of an attempt to contain the potentially explosive needs of urban youth and the educational aspirations of parents.

The establishment of Bantu Education cannot be explained purely by repression or purely by ideology. The success of the state in stabilising the system in the 60s had two components. First, the state successfully used force against popular movements. Second, it was engaged in a struggle (only fragmentarily successful) to impose a new educational ideology.

The new school system provided a decisive material element in consolidating popular acquiescence. The school boycotts and other campaigns against Bantu Education failed to gain their professed objectives. However, they increased the pressure on the state to attempt to contain educational aspirations through further school provision. All of this is not to minimise the racist discriminatory and

materially impoverished character of Bantu Education. It is merely to state that it represented the outcome of a struggle over educational restructuring. In that struggle, the popular classes were not passive bystanders.

So the apparent victory of the state contained the seeds of the destruction of the new educational order.

### The Course of the Boycott

The ANC was initially slow to respond to the passage of the Bantu Education Act in 1953 and to the government's plans for its implementation during 1955. However, an ANC conference in Durban in December 1954 decided on an indefinite boycott of primary schools beginning on 1 April 1955.

In March, because of the lack of membership response, the ANC's National Executive Committee (NEC) decided to postpone the boycott of schools. Instead it would concentrate on a boycott of school boards and school committees. In the Transvaal there was considerable pressure from members and local leaders for the school boycott to go ahead. Another conference in Port Elizabeth, from 9 to 10 April, supported the principle of an indefinite boycott. The date for the national implementation of the boycott was left to the NEC. However, local boycotts could begin earlier with the NEC's permission.

On 12 April a boycott started on the East Rand. It spread to townships nearer central Johannesburg. From 23 April, boycotts took place in the Eastern Cape. Thousands of school pupils participated, but the boycotts did not spread significantly beyond these two regions. On 23 May, a conference in Johannesburg established the AEM. It set about creating and servicing the cultural clubs mentioned above – alternative educational facilities for school students. The clubs were vigorous well into 1956. However, outside of a few areas of particular militancy, most black scholars stayed inside the school system.

Gradually, support for the boycott eroded. By late 1956 the ANC had decided to abandon the strategy.

### Youth Culture and Politics in the 50s

Since the mid-70s youth has played a central part in political struggles in South Africa. Youth involvement in struggle can have few historical precedents. It comes as something of a shock to realise that the 50s urban youth were relatively unpoliticised. This was partly the result of organisational problems on the side of the ANC. It was also due to the culture generated by the structural position of urban youth in that era.

From the early 50s, the ANC made efforts to recruit substantial



difficulties. Its youth wing, the ANCYL, had emerged in the 40s. This intellectual ginger group of young leaders tried to change the policy of the ANC in a more militant direction. As an organisation, the ANCYL was ill adapted to attracting young people to its ranks. As an ANC document of the early 50s put it, the ANCYL

consists mainly of intellectuals who feel they must watch over the policy of the ANC and no attempt is made to organise sections of young African workers, scholars or peasants.

As an ANCYL publication admitted, the ANCYL 'has but scratched the surface in its efforts to create a genuine mass youth movement in this country'.

The geographical base of the ANCYL was limited to those areas where the ANC had very strong support. At its 1954 conference there were only delegates from the Cape and Transvaal. There was no representation from Natal or the Orange Free State. Details of an ANCYL provincial conference in 1955 show its Transvaal organisational structures were confined to the Rand. There were no branches in the Pretoria or Vereeniging areas or the rural areas.

The ANC leadership began, from the early 50s, to direct the ANCYL toward changing itself into a more substantial organisation. In 1953 Robert Resha, the ANCYL's Transvaal leader, made a call through *The African Lodestar* for the ANCYL to establish ANC and ANCYL branches throughout the Transvaal. ANC Secretary General Walter Sisulu subsequently called on the youth to make 1954 a year of 'Mass Youth Action against Fascism'. Duma Nokwe, the ANCYL's Assistant National Secretary, advanced a policy of creating a 'Mass Youth League'. He proposed doing this by holding 'mass youth conferences'.

The ANCYL's 1954 conference resolved to strengthen its activity and organisation. This direction toward the building of a mass youth organisation was continued into the period of the boycott.

The ANCYL made some quite vigorous attempts to implement these policies in the period 1954 to 1955. They embarked on a drive to convene mass meetings of youth, at some of which new ANCYL branches were formed. By 1955, the Transvaal ANCYL claimed at least six new branches on the Rand and one in Klerksdorp. The ANCYL showed more involvement in practical political campaigns than before. It played a prominent role in resisting removals in Sophiatown/Western Native Townships and in Germiston. It was logical the ANCYL should play an important part in the education boycott campaign. An ANCYL working group plan listed their tasks. Students' committees were to be formed at all levels to organise students. Special organisations for students were to be revived or set up. Mass

meetings were planned. Bulletins on Bantu Education were to be distributed. ANCYL members were to make contact with parents and teachers. The ANCYL was to be involved in the establishment of the broadly based anti-Bantu Education committees, which would coordinate the boycott in each area. To some extent these plans were implemented. On the Rand, there was considerable activity by the Western Areas, Germiston, Natalspruit, Benoni, Brakpan and Alexandra ANCYL branches.

However, these attempts to organise youth politically on a mass scale were, generally, extremely unsuccessful. The NEC commented at an ANC conference at the end of 1955 that the ANCYL had failed to become a mass movement of the youth. The NEC said the ANCYL relationship with the ANC was far from satisfactory. The Transvaal ANCYL's report for 1955 explains that despite the establishment of some new branches, some of the established branches had deteriorated and collapsed. Although most branches had recruited members, most had also lost members.

By 1956, the ANCYL seems to have been at an extremely low ebb. ANCYL leader T. Makiwane commented that the ANCYL's work in the Transvaal was 'at a virtual standstill'.

To some extent these difficulties arose because the ANCYL aimed at an older and more intellectual constituency. A 1954 ANCYL publication urges readers, 'Have you enrolled your son/daughter in the Youth League?' This suggests something of an inability to address young people directly. Similarly, a 1956 edition of the same journal identifies 19- to 36-year-olds as the target group for ANCYL recruitment. This lack of interest in recruiting teenagers was clearly incompatible with the aim of a 'mass youth organisation'. Yet the school boycott was supposed to have been directed at primary schools.

The ANCYL was also handicapped by a number of more technical organisational considerations. Its members were frequently used as ANC foot-soldiers in campaigns and thus neglected building up the ANCYL. There was a lack of infrastructure. The Transvaal ANCYL didn't have one full-time official. A frequent leadership complaint was that the ANCYL did not organise cultural activities.

The ANCYL's work was disrupted by the long factional battle between the ANC leadership and the Africanist grouping. In the Transvaal, the Orlando ANCYL branch under Potlake Leballo was the Africanist's stronghold. This grouping was particularly opposed to the ANC's 'Congress of the People' initiative. It was highly critical of the education boycott. Controversy with the Africanists seems to have absorbed an enormous amount of the ANCYL leadership's energy.

It would be unfair and inaccurate to identify these difficulties with

the main cause of the ANCYL's inability to evoke a mass response from urban black youth. The level of mass politicisation of youth was negligible in the 50s. The ANCYL's constituency was far less easy to mobilise than that of student militants in the post-1976 era. As an ANCYL journal put it in 1955, 'many of our young people still believe they are not interested in politics'.

In its 1956 report, the ANCYL's Sophiatown branch executive warned against the danger of targeting the 'mighty few politically serious youth'. The Sophiatown ANCYL clearly found the majority of young people had interests quite distinct from theirs. 'We can strengthen [the branch] by catering for the ordinary sporting and social youth. By having interests in their activities [sic]. They in turn will have interest and confidence in the ANCYL movement.'

What explains the contrast between the urban black youth in recent decades and the 50s youth?

The inadequacy of state provision for the reproduction of the working class in the 50s meant urban youth was drawn into a 'gangster' sub-culture. There was the absence of an effective school system. There was a lack of employment prospects. The permanently urbanised proletariat was a recent development. All these factors forced youth to seek individual, and often criminal, rather than collective and political, solutions. Writer Don Mattera was a member of a Sophiatown gang. He captures very clearly the way in which the 'gangster' or urban youth made organisation difficult for the ANC:

But at this time there were more tsotsis and gangsters than people at work. So there was this social problem. So the politician could not organise successfully because he was being hampered by the social disorder.

The advent of Bantu Education largely changed this youth culture in the 60s and 70s. Township youth of the 50s was patchily reached by the school system. Bantu Education, on the other hand, drew in a larger proportion of youth than the mission system. It provided some experience of an under-resourced, inferior and repressive education system. The rapid expansion of the education system provided youth with a common set of political problems. It provided a common identity and a structure within which they could react to those problems.

A somewhat anarchic spirit prevailed among the bulk of urban youth. However, parental authority was more evident among regular 50s school-goers than in more recent times. This inhibited the emergence of self-organised school student movements. The tendency of young people to impose their political will unilaterally on their elders became a major political problem in the 80s. By contrast, the 1955

boycott was an adult-controlled action. There is no evidence of clashes of opinion between students and parents. It is probable that between the 50s and the 70s there was a shift in authority relations within the family. This must be central to an understanding of post-1976 student movements.

### 'People's Education': Strengths and Limitations

The first limitation of the boycott's possibilities was the lack of self-organisation and political awareness among the youth.

The second was the material inability of the AEM to provide an institutional alternative in the education field. The ANC clearly did envisage itself as providing a different vision of education.

'People's Education for People's Power', a major slogan and strategy of popular political movements in South Africa in the 1980s was often perceived as an entirely new development. But in a strictly historical sense 'People's Education' is not a new concept. During the 1955 to 1956 boycotts, the ANC advanced the slogan of People's Education in exactly the same sense in which it was used in the 1980s. An ANC leadership document of 1955 defines People's Education as: 'Democratic-Liberatory education . . . it will be democratic in control, organisation and purpose . . . it will be liberatory in object because its main object will be to equip the people and the youth to fulfil their historic task of liberating themselves.' The impact of the concept was, however, limited during the 50s. There was some attempt, during the decade, to popularise the slogan. Peter Ntithe, an ANCYL activist, greeted a 1955 Sophiatown conference on Bantu Education with the words: 'Long live the People's Education.' However, the slogan was not widely taken up.

What did People's Education achieve during the 50s? It did briefly sustain a remarkable level of organised alternative schooling activity. In national terms, though, it was limited in its impact and hampered by a lack of resources. The cultural clubs were prevented by the Bantu Education Act from presenting themselves as schools or teaching formal courses. Considering the lack of available resources and funding, the AEM did a remarkable job. It sustained networks of clubs on the Rand and in the Eastern Cape through the period of the boycott. Members of the ANC and Congress of Democrats (COD) provided co-ordination and support for these projects. The club at Korsten in the Eastern Cape provided 'games, physical exercises, health talks and singing'. It also had a feeding scheme for the children. The New Brighton Club catered for about 1 000 children and boasted a well-trained choir. The Veeplaats Club had 900 children, the one in Brakpan, 800. At Kleinskool the club was so effective that after a year 75 per