J. Hyslop: The Classroom Struggle.

Beyond The Revolt of 1976: Results.

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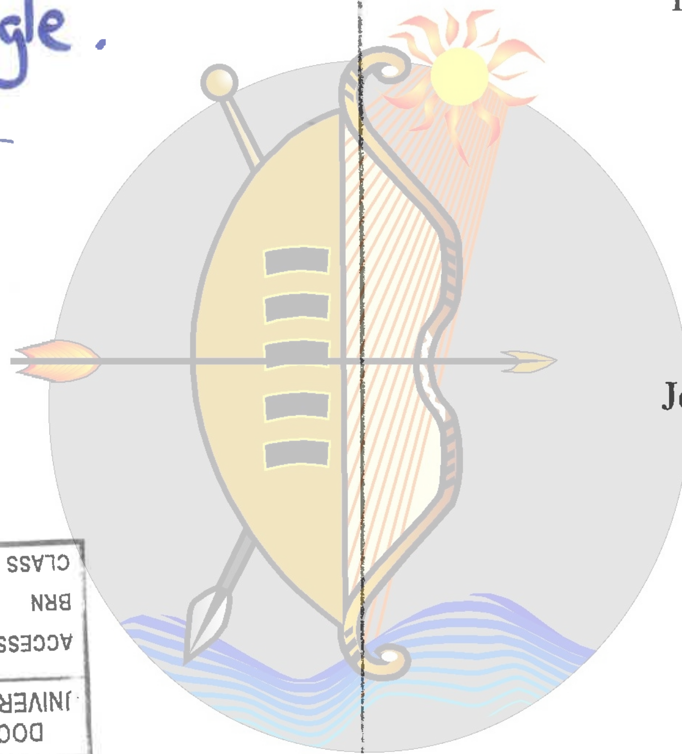

# The Classroom Struggle

## Policy and Resistance in South Africa 1940–1990

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*CHAPTER NINE*

# Beyond the Revolt: 1972 to 1987

It was ultimately urban youth who blocked forever the state's plans to build apartheid on Verwoerd's blueprint.

The 1976 to 1977 Soweto uprising, starting as it did with schoolchildren, so harnessed mass support that it injected a new stamina into all facets of the liberation movement.

Renewed student action, in 1980 to 1981 and later in 1984 to 1987, detonated the biggest explosion of worker and community struggle the regime had ever encountered.

On every front, including education, the state's reform policy was obstructed and threatened with permanent defeat. Youth and students formed the front line of the resistance, engaging in street battles, organising mass action and mounting pickets.

The student movement can only be understood in the changing historical context. It is not enough to explain student uprisings as a form of resistance to an unchanging Bantu Education system.

By the late 60s, the Vorster government's policies were hindering industrial capital's attempts to recruit adequate numbers of black semi-skilled operatives, skilled workers and clerical employees. The regime's attempt to stifle urban black secondary education, and its prohibition of urban black technical training, created major problems for management.

Big business started to contest these policies in the early 70s. Increased pressure on the state eased up some policies. These included statutory discrimination in skilled employment and restrictions on the number of blacks in urban industry.

In 1972, in line with this 'verligte' approach, the state changed its budgetary policy in relation to urban schooling. This has been covered in great detail in earlier chapters. More money was made available for



schools and private capital was encouraged to sponsor urban educational projects. Some technical training of black youth in urban areas was finally allowed. These developments were to have important social consequences.

The number of secondary school students tripled between 1970 and 1975. Yet there was no equal expansion of job opportunities. While more blacks were being employed in clerical and technical jobs, the numbers of unemployed high school drop-outs multiplied. As if those factors were not enough to create volatility, the state restructured the black school system from a 13-year to a 12-year curriculum. At the beginning of 1976, the last two years of primary school were pushed into the first year of secondary school.

The growing pressure on space at the schools, co-existed with another development. This was the growth of political consciousness within urban working-class youth culture.

The year 1969 had seen the emergence of the university-based SASO, the first of the BC organisations. The school arm of this was called SASM. Unity of black people, including 'Coloureds', and Indians became the BCM's rallying call.

The ideological content of the BCM was vital in providing a new political awareness among students. The sense that it was possible to overthrow the regime was further inspired by regional events. These included the collapse of colonialism in Mozambique and Angola and the military struggle in Zimbabwe and Namibia. At home, worker militancy and the mass strikes of 1973 provided further impetus.

Signs of the new militancy among students were first evident in late 1974 and into 1975. In 1975, the Eastern Cape branch of SASM was involved in strikes over educational grievances.

The spark which set off the explosion was the insistence on the use of Afrikaans as a medium of education, detailed in the previous chapter.

In Soweto, the first school went on strike in April 1976. The strike spread to another eight schools. On 13 June, SASM convened a delegate meeting at Naledi High School that established the SSRC. The SSRC called for a demonstration for 16 June.

The violent response with which the police met the students has been well documented. The uprising spread throughout the Southern Transvaal and later, the Cape. It is now known that thousands lost their lives to police action from June 1976. The closure of state schools by the education minister and the dropping of the Afrikaans decision failed to check the spread of the upheaval.

Resistance and boycotts at schools spilt over into an attack on the government instituted Urban Bantu Councils (UBCs), where students forced the resignation of councillors.

The boycotts only started to fizzle out in late 1977. Thousands of students had left the country to join MK. The BCM had been banned, and political exhaustion could not sustain mass resistance during that period.

The SSRC effectively ended state regulation and control over Soweto. It mobilised on broader working class issues and provided a model for students elsewhere in the country to follow.

While the influence of the BCM is undisputed, it is still unclear to what extent the ANC provided the underground inspiration for the Soweto uprising. What is known is that it was in the aftermath of the uprising that the ANC really began to link with the new political generation. Some 6 000 to 10 000 students who had left for guerrilla training or simply as refugees moved into ANC organisational structures.

The state was reeling in the period following the 1976–1977 uprising. This had as much to do with the upsurge of popular resistance as with the internal power squabbles within the NP ruling elite. Conservative proponents of traditional apartheid led by Connie Mulder were pitted against the technocratic alliance of Afrikaner business and military chiefs around P.W. Botha.

Some stop-gap measures were taken, including in the educational arena. Afrikaans as a compulsory language of instruction was dropped. Compulsory education was proposed in some areas and teacher upgrading programmes were developed. The BED became the Department of Education and Training (DET).

Student organisation meanwhile strengthened and identified its position. The Congress of South African Students (COSAS), formed in 1979, based its stance on the Freedom Charter. Another student organisation, the Azanian Students Movement (AZASM), continued to identify with the BC tradition.

The second cycle of student struggles began in February 1980 when school boycotts broke out in the 'Coloured' schools of the Western Cape. These boycotts were sparked by the student outcry at South African Defence Force (SADF) national servicemen teaching in schools. There was also a demand for free and compulsory education and a call for re-admission of barred pupils. The boycotts spread to 'Coloured' and Indian schools elsewhere in the country, and subsequently to DET schools.

The struggles of 1980 to 1981 displayed a broader degree of political participation. In the Western Cape boycotting students participated in a red meat boycott in solidarity with striking meat workers. In the Eastern Cape students also began to demand the withdrawal of police from their areas, and to reject compulsory homeland citizenship. Seventy-seven African schools were closed by the DET in this period.

It was clear the state would have to do an about-turn to address itself to the task of formulating a policy of restructuring in education. Stop-gap measures would not satisfy students.

The state's reform strategy, in the era of P.W. Botha, was aimed at defusing the revolutionary potential of student and worker movements. It simultaneously catered for the needs of industry, which needed to employ more blacks at semi-skilled, skilled, clerical and managerial levels.

The first stage of reform was at the economic and market levels. In accordance with recommendations of the Riekert and Wiehahn Reports, urban residence and employment rights were extended to sections of blacks. Black trade unionism was legalised. Simultaneously, the state went all out to encourage the formation of a black business class.

The second phase of reform saw a combination of attempts at political co-option of sections of the black population. People were co-opted for bodies such as the tricameral parliament and the Regional Services Councils (RSCs). However, the might of the state – the military and the police – stayed firmly within white control.

Both stages were incorporated into Broederbonder Professor J.P. de Lange's report on the reform strategy for education. De Lange's proposals, which dovetailed with Botha's 'Total Strategy', were aimed at reducing racial differentials but intensifying class ones. It thus formed a central component of state reform strategy.

De Lange wanted a more class-stratified schooling system but equal education for all ethnic groups. He proposed free and compulsory primary schooling with two streams at secondary level – a vocational stream subsidised by industry and an academic stream subsidised by parents. Tertiary education would also be integrated and have a greater technical component.

During the 1980s the DET budget increased massively: from R143 million in 1978/79 to R709 million in 1984/85. The state, in 1984, spent seven times more on white children than on black. An appalling discrepancy, although in sharp contrast to the situation in 1970 when the ratio was 18 to one.

The number of African secondary school pupils increased from under 600 000 in 1980 to more than one million in 1984. The same year saw a dramatic increase in the number of school buildings being built and conversion of a number of schools into technical schools. These developments occurred within urban areas and the bantustans. In Bophuthatswana, 15 new technical institutions were set up from 1977 to 1982.

Employers who did in-service training were granted huge tax breaks.

Private schools could get subsidies and the statutory racial restrictions on entrance to them and to universities were allowed to lapse. However, De Lange's agenda was denied legitimacy by students.

A second form of opposition came from within the NP. The NP was then divided into pro- and anti-reform camps and ultimately experienced the breakaway of the Conservative Party (CP).

When the White Paper on education was published in November 1983, it emerged that some of De Lange's proposals were refused. Christian National ideology was emphasised. A single education ministry was rejected.

The same year both COSAS and AZASM got a boost from two new legal political fronts. COSAS became the school wing of the United Democratic Front (UDF), while AZASM was drawn into the National Forum (NF).

In 1984, boycotts began anew, initially because of the 1983 matriculation examination. There are several written accounts detailing the poor and corrupt administration of this examination. Pass rates had dropped sharply between 1980 to 1983, leading to suspicions that the authorities were trying to limit the number of high school graduates.

Students at one school in Atteridgeville, Pretoria, found unmarked scripts from the previous year in their school – after the marks had been published. COSAS took up the matric question as well as several other student demands: an end to sexual harassment, scrapping of the age limits enforced in schools and an end to corporal punishment. COSAS also launched a system of Student Representative Councils.

The initial boycotts started in Atteridgeville and at Cradock in the Eastern Cape. The Cradock boycott began when a popular headmaster, Matthew Goniwe, was transferred from Cradock to a neighbouring town, Graaff-Reinet. During the boycott Goniwe was detained. Graaff-Reinet students joined the boycott.

Matthew Goniwe was one of four UDF activists who were later assassinated. A later inquest proved military intelligence involvement.

When the boycotts spread to the Southern Transvaal, the DET initially suggested a form of student representation including teachers, principals and official school committee members. This was rejected by teachers. From then on the DET started closing down boycotting schools.

The 1984 students' grievances had begun over local education issues. However, students could now take up issues nationally through COSAS, which had grown into a mass movement. In this way short-term demands could be linked to national political issues.

Student activists took the initiative, during 1983 and 1984, to found



the 'youth congresses' among mainly unemployed young blacks in the townships.

Between August 1984 and December 1985 youth became the shock troops in a battle for control of the township streets. The issue at stake initially was the state's elections for the 'Coloured' and Indian houses of the tricameral parliament. Both COSAS and NF student organisations set up school boycotts as part of a wider boycott of the elections. About 800 000 students, mostly from 'Coloured' schools, participated in the boycott of the election for the 'Coloured' chamber on 22 August.

These boycotts did not last in most areas. However, in the Vaal Triangle police killings and subsequent rioting transformed school boycotts into a leading part of a national political struggle. More than 200 000 students in the Vaal Triangle joined the boycott, which gained momentum nationally in September and October. The state's response was to close down boycotting schools.

A new development was the support activities by community, trade union and political organisations for the students. Joint planning bodies, embracing COSAS, community organisations and major trade unions found a model in the township of KwaThema on 22 October in support of school students' demands. This planning group called a Southern Transvaal stay-away which supported student demands, including establishment of SRCs. They also raised wider economic demands, such as an end to rent and bus-fare increases and called for the withdrawal of the army from the townships. When the stay-away took place on 5 to 6 November 1984, about 400 000 students from more than 300 schools and anything between 300 000 and 800 000 workers participated.

Similar joint planning bodies in other areas did not always run as smoothly. In numerous cases there was antagonism between students and workers when students tried to railroad workers into giving specific forms of support.

When the student boycotts continued to spread through the entire country in the remainder of 1985, the state tried to quell the boycotts by force. In July, a state of emergency was declared in regions of the Eastern Cape, Southern Transvaal and Northern Free State. COSAS was banned and large numbers of COSAS members were arrested.

The emergency sparked off the outbreak of student protest in the Western Cape, which had been politically quiet except for the demonstrations around the 'Coloured' elections. A month after the emergency, there were boycotts at schools controlled by the ('Coloured') Department of Education and Culture and the DET. Three months of fighting between students and police, mass rallies, consumer boycotts

and harsh repression followed. Students elected a strong co-ordinating body, the Western Cape Student Action Committee (WECSAC), which led their campaign.

The DET tried to close down the schools in early September, but students responded with a mass occupation of schools on 17 September. At the peak of student rebellion, the government imposed a state of emergency in the Western Cape at the end of October.

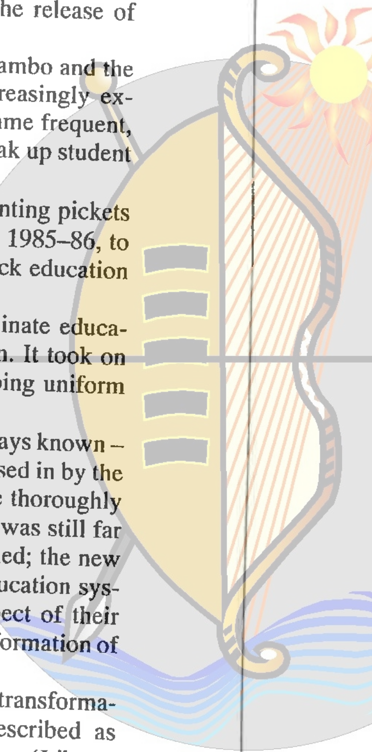
During 1985 it became clear students' demands had shifted from specific educational demands to broad political ones. Demands included withdrawal of troops from the townships and the release of detainees.

Student rallies featured songs of praise to Mandela, Tambo and the ANC's armed wing, MK. Student political culture increasingly expressed allegiance to the ANC. Clashes with police became frequent, as youths tried to barricade streets and police tried to break up student meetings.

Some student militants enforced the boycotts by mounting pickets at school gates or bus stops. The state attempted, during 1985–86, to supplement repression with boosting expenditure on black education each year, in line with the De Lange strategy.

A new structure was set up by government to co-ordinate educational restructuring – the Ministry of National Education. It took on the role of co-ordinating educational policy and developing uniform administrative policies.

However, the DET – or 'Bantu Education' as it was always known – had lost any shred of legitimacy. No amount of money tossed in by the state could buy credibility among the students, who were thoroughly aware of the limitations of the changes. White schooling was still far better funded; black teachers remained inadequately trained; the new administrative structure stopped well short of a single education system. Students saw the education system as just one aspect of their experience as oppressed people. They sought radical transformation of society.



But the students had a millenarian expectation that the transformation would come overnight. This outlook has been described as 'immediatism', and led to the popularising of slogans such as 'Liberation Now, Education Later'. Assuming that revolution was imminent, some students began to view any return to school as a betrayal. Boycotts became a principle rather than a tactic. By the end of the year, students were making calls for 1986 to be 'The Year of No Schooling'.

Students out of school could not be organised; there was also tension between the 'immediatists' and those who wanted to return to school.



Problems also arose in areas where students tried to whip up support for community initiatives. In some instances there were rifts between students and teachers; the former often regarded the latter as 'sell-outs'. This rift was not entirely mended by the formation in 1985 of the National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA) which organised younger, more radical teachers. The more cautious, older teacher kept up their membership of the conservative ATASA.

There was a fear by many of the older generation that student militancy would fragment, rather than cement, their community. This was particularly the case when students took it upon themselves to avenge the death of fellow students. Often the guilt of those attacked was open to question. Students' actions had the effect of terrorising the community rather than creating an alternative form of justice.

Several violent incidents illustrated the dangers present in an excessively amorphous movement of township youth. In August 1985, a march called by boycotting students in Durban's Inanda area attacked Indian-owned housing and shops. In the last third of 1985, violent clashes took place constantly between student supporters of the UDF and the NF. People seen to have the 'wrong line' were constantly accused of being 'police agents'.

By the end of 1985, urban black education had totally collapsed. Out of 25 584 DET matric class students in 'white areas', only 10 523 wrote the final examination and less than half passed. (In the bantustans, with the exception of the Transkei, students were largely unaffected by the student movement.)

The fear that rural-urban divisions would be entrenched and that incidents of violence could affect the entire movement, were averted with the rise of a new organisation in 1985 to 1986. The National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) with its strategy of 'People's Education' would save the student movement from devouring itself.

Although there were organisations like the Parent-Teacher-Student' Associations (PTSAs) in the Western Cape, the beginnings of a national response emerged in Soweto in late 1986. In October the Soweto Civic Association convened a mass meeting of parents. From this meeting came the formation of the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee (SPCC). Its mandate was to negotiate with the DET on the issues of postponement of the end-of-year exams and the withdrawal of troops from the townships.

As parents became aware students were preparing a 'Year of No Schooling', they rallied to the SPCC. This body worked hard at roping in teachers too – not just those from NEUSA but also the ATASA teachers.

Although it improved community-student relations, the SPCC needed to make an impact nationally. This was important if it was to address the situation properly and to provide an alternative to the 'Liberation before Education' attitude. The SPCC called a National Education Crisis Conference at the end of December. (During Christmas 1985 an SPCC delegation visited Harare for discussions with the ANC.) The conference, which took place at the University of the Witwatersrand on 28 and 29 December 1985, spelt out that the ANC did not support an indefinite boycott until liberation.

'People's Education for People's Power' became the new slogan after the ANC intervention. It meant that those in the educational struggle should try to impose their priorities on the state schools rather than opt out of them.

Crisis committees, under the umbrella of the NECC, were set up throughout the country. These committees created a network of PTSAs, which formed an alternative educational authority, challenging state control of education and holding mass meetings far and wide. Students agreed to return to school on 28 January rather than the official opening date of 8 January. The state was given three months to respond to a set of educational and political demands. COSAS was to be legalised, the emergency was to be ended, detainees were to be released.

The NECC succeeded in breaking the grip of 'immediatism' and also inspired ATASA to withdraw from state education bodies and begin to support political calls to action. At the end of March 1986, the NECC consolidated its progress with a conference in Durban. The event began with a clash between Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) vigilantes, who had gatecrashed the conference, and delegates. It ended with the decision to continue to return to school even though the state had not delivered on the three demands. However, while the NECC's return to school held nationally, it crumbled in some areas. The boycott continued in the Durban region, in the Southern Transvaal, and parts of the Northern and Eastern Transvaal.

A contributory factor in the confusion was the poor relationship between the UDF and the NF. The latter made independent calls for mass action of different dates from those put forward by the NECC. Within the bantustans, homeland education departments refused to talk to the NECC. Vigilantes in KwaNdebele and KwaZulu unleashed their wrath on students.

The double messages from the state about how it would respond to the NECC's demands reflected, once again, the debate raging within the NP on the way ahead. The securocrats insisted order had to be restored before reform could continue. Others favoured a combination of force with practical changes in policy that could generate some support for the regime.



During the early part of the year the NECC was able to negotiate with Deputy Minister Sam de Beer, a leading light in the conciliatory faction. A number of government leaders dropped hints that a degree of change in education policy was possible. However, around April, the hardliners seem to have won the battle in the cabinet. Negotiations were refused, NECC officials were arrested on a wide scale, and the government declared a national state of emergency in June.

The schools, which were on holiday at the time, had their reopening delayed until mid-July. Government announced all students would have to re-register and would be issued with identification, and that other new security measures would be introduced at schools. This led to renewed boycott activity in Southern Transvaal, where returning students burnt their new ID cards. In the Eastern Cape many students refused to register.

Once again clashes between students and police became the order of the day. More than 300 000 students who refused to register were excluded from school. The DET closed some 73 boycotting schools.

The NECC still succeeded in convincing the majority of students to organise themselves within the schools rather than move back to indefinite boycotts. Through the concept of 'People's Education' they persuaded students to see the school system as an arena of struggle. They encouraged students to write their end-of-year exams and rejected the actions of groups of youths who attacked examinees. Despite the difficult circumstances, students in some parts of the country battled to continue with the construction of PTSAs.

A vindication of the NECC's approach came at the beginning of the next school year, in January 1987. Despite various state measures that were introduced to ban people's education activities, students engaged in a disciplined return to school.

It was largely through the NECC that the rift between community and students was healed, and that students were able to get a practical political perspective.

Ten years later, South Africa finally has one education ministry trying to consolidate 13 systems of education into one national programme.

But 16 June 1996 – 20 years after the Soweto uprising – was a sad reminder of the legacy of Bantu Education.

Several newspapers marked 16 June with interviews with some of the original 'revolutionaries' who stood trial as leaders of the student uprising. Otherwise the news was not good.

For months racial tension had simmered at a school in Potgietersrus.

Right-wing white parents refused to send their children to school with black children. After a protracted legal battle, the white parents were ruled out of order, but racial violence then broke out.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) carried a report about the Cape Flats, where a large class of children was being taught in a bottlestore, because there was no building for them.

Journalist Amma Oman of the *Sunday Independent* interviewed students from 1976. Majakatha Mokoena, now a prominent businessman, returned to his old school in Soweto. He discovered the syllabus hadn't changed in 20 years.

But one would have to look hard to find a more disillusioned voice than that of Sandile Mamela. Writing in *City Press*, he said: 'Whatever promises of a better life 16 June might have aroused in the townships, today it is mocked by a prevalence of violence, lawlessness, lack of discipline and family breakdown.'

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