

## Soweto Riots

The main thrust of Baruch Hirson's argument is towards denying the importance of the Black Consciousness movement as an instigator of, or an influence upon, the uprising; instead, in the centre of the historical stage he places the reassertion of African working-class militancy. As with Brickhill and Brooks, Hirson's analysis emphasises the organisational autonomy of SASM from the Black Consciousness groups as well as the involvement of a few of its leaders with the ANC. Black Consciousness ideas had little impact on schoolchildren; more important in affecting their behaviour were the reorganisation of secondary schools and the threat of eventual unemployment.

Overshadowing the significance of Black Consciousness in contributing to the ideological climate of rebellion, Hirson argues, was the effect of the

strikes of 1973 and 1974 which instilled a new feeling of self-confidence in the urban African community (which of course was augmented by the South African army's inability to defeat the MPLA in Angola during the summer of 1975-6). The strikes directly affected a much larger section of the population than any of the Black Consciousness organisations, helping to induce an appetite for resistance and confrontation.

In comparison with these first three treatments, the findings of the South African government's Commissioner of Inquiry, Mr Justice Cillie, as to the causes of the uprising are intellectually otiose. The immediate causes, argues the Commissioner, lay in the field of communication: in the lack of official awareness of the extent of dissatisfaction over the Afrikaans issue and in the deficiencies in police township intelligence which prevented them from foreseeing an imminent eruption.

The weakness of both contentions is that they tend to estimate the influence of ideas in terms of formal organisational structures and affiliations. Given the fact that Black

Consciousness seems to have been especially pervasive among university students, school teachers and churchmen it would surely have been a little surprising if sentiments inspired from it were not found in schoolchildren for whom such people were an important reference group. And

if one insists on narrowing the focus to a consideration of the organisations, it does not take very long to find traces of Black Consciousness influence on the SSRC and its predecessors. At the third annual conference of SASM, held in Roodepoort one month before the uprising began, the theme of the discussion was 'Reconstruction towards Self-Determination'. Lecture titles included 'Militancy on the Campuses', 'Black Theology', and 'Black Consciousness and the History of the Struggle'.<sup>27</sup> Both Cillie and Hirson incidentally provide powerful testimony to the importance of Black Consciousness as a motivating force in the western Cape coloured community's participation in the revolt.<sup>28</sup>

Hirson's argument that it was the African working class, rather than the students, who set the pace of renewed resistance in the 1970s is very difficult to evaluate. Certainly it is possible that the victories arising from strike action may have contributed to the political assertiveness of urban blacks. Nevertheless it should be remembered that in 1976 any memories of events in 1973 would have been dimmed by three years, that subsequent strikes were accorded very little press publicity, and that the strike movement as a whole developed mainly in Natal, the East Rand, the East London conurbation, not in Johannesburg. It is also relevant to point out that Soweto was not a predominantly industrial working-class community; it had a disproportionately large white collar/petty-bourgeois group - numbering 50 000 - and the township's population had been left virtually untouched by the revival of working-class consciousness and trade unionism that had begun elsewhere. It

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Having sketched in the main features which form the background to the Soweto uprising – that is, economic recession, a more politically assertive aspirant African petty bourgeoisie, and consecutive waves of labour unrest – we can turn to an examination of the revolt itself. The initial spark to what was to develop into a virtual communal insurrection was provided by police over-reaction to a street procession of secondary school pupils on their way to Orlando stadium to protest against the recent insistence by the educational authorities that arithmetic and social studies be taught in Afrikaans. The demonstration had been preceded by strikes and attacks on police and teachers at several junior secondary schools in Soweto. On 13 June 1976, at a meeting of the South African Students' Movement (SASM) convened at Naledi High School, a Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC) was formed, composed of SASM delegates, two from each Soweto secondary school. It was this body, under the initial chairmanship of Tebello Motopayane, which planned the fateful demonstration for 16 June. On 16

The next day the revolt assumed national proportions with protests by schoolchildren and violent police response in Cape Town and the urban centres of the eastern Cape. By the end of the year the only African urban communities relatively unaffected by the disturbances were those in Natal.

The Soweto uprising had subsided leaving in its wake at least 575 dead and 2 389 wounded (the highly conservative official estimates)<sup>19</sup> and a completely transformed political environment.

Since 1976 four major analyses of the revolt have appeared, each with differing emphases upon the various factors they perceived to be the causes of the revolt as well as contrasting interpretations of its development and significance. Many of these differences have flowed from the ideological premises of the writers –

... Kane-Berman's analysis was the first to be published. For him 'the single most important factor' in explaining the volatility of the townships was the influence of Black Consciousness ideology.<sup>20</sup> A crisis of raised expectations contributed to the rebellious mood of the African urban population: a large increase in secondary school graduates as the result of recent educational expansion, as well as steadily rising wages, led to acute frustration as school leavers were confronted by a dwindling job supply and more affluent wage-earners by an ever-worsening housing shortage.<sup>21</sup>

Jeremy Brickhill and Alan Brooks place the main emphasis of their analysis of the causes of the revolt on the changes in the educational system. In 1970, in response to the skilled labour shortage, there began a rapid expansion of African secondary education which was to nearly treble its intake during the next five years. The effects of this expansion were especially acute in Soweto

where the growth in numbers of secondary school pupils had been especially swift. The expansion of the system obviously necessitated more expenditure on it but because of the recession additional funds were not allocated. Secondary schools, especially in the junior forms, became very overcrowded. This overcrowding reached crisis-point in 1975 when, in order to further enlarge the flow of secondary school graduates, the final primary form was incorporated into the lowest secondary grade, effectively doubling the 1976 secondary school intake. To an educational system already subject to severe strains was added the doctrinaire<sup>22</sup> ruling on the use of Afrikaans in mathematics and social studies. This was objectionable on several grounds; few teachers were qualified to use the language, proficiency in English was popularly regarded as a prerequisite for clerical employment, and Afrikaans was unacceptable for ideological reasons.