

# A Soweto son comes home

Describe how you saw the events leading up to 16 June 1976?

I was in Std 9 at Musi High in Pimville.

The protests against the compulsory use of Afrikaans as a language of instruction had started at the end of 1975.

In February and March of 1976 students at one or two schools had called for the withdrawal of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. By late May seven schools had gone on strike.

SASM, the high school version of SASO, was involved in organising a march to Orlando Stadium.

**Chris Mathabe has just been released from Robben Island where he spent nine years arising out of his student activities. He was an executive member of the Soweto Students League before his arrest in 1979. NUM News interviewed him about the June 1976 uprising.**

Describe the events of that day?

What happened on that day will go down in our people's history. June 16 was a typical Transvaal mid-winter day.

It was warm, not freezing cold. The news had spread through all

the schools that June 16 was going to be the day of the march from Morris Isaacson. The mood was one of excitement.

At our school immediately after assembly the whole school dispersed. We were marching West to join the other marchers.

The whole time other schools

and groups of pupils were joining in. All the way along the march was peaceful although pupils were excited.

I wasn't in the crowd that the police fired on, killing Hector Petersen and others. That happened before our school reached that point. All we saw was smoke and police convoys everywhere.

Then the news of the killings spread. At once the atmosphere changed. People were very angry and the burning started.

Many symbols of white rule like beerhalls and council offices were at tacked.

The protests carried on through that night. Twenty five people were killed that day and 200 injured.

What was the response of workers?

Now you must remember at that time workers were not organised like they are today: there was no COSATU or political formations like UDF. Workers were more concerned about the education problem as parents, than in political terms.

There was a feeling of great anger in the hearts of all the people of Soweto - housewives, the unemployed and even the small children. From then on it was war. Day after day we would go to school to meet and then go into the streets.

From the day of the march the schools were never the same. The schools served as assembly points. They were the only places where students could meet together and get information about developments.

What was the state of organisation at that time?

There were no proper structures for co-ordination apart from the student grouping. Students recognised that they had to involve parents - that without the support of the working people

the problems of education could not be resolved.

On the 4 August there was a call by the newly formed Soweto Students Representative Council for a stayaway.

Eighty five percent of Johannesburg's workers responded. During 1976 there were three stayaways. Although most people stayed away willingly some of them were coerced.

It was a very different situation to that of today where people are more political and have been mobilised and are not intimidated into staying away.

As we entered 1977 our demands shifted. We were not only looking at the problem of Afrikaans, or even of Bantu Education but the whole system.

In April students staged a march to protest the 80 percent rise in rents. In June the Urban Bantu Council collapsed.

June of 1977 was a sad time. On 10 June 21 people, including the newly elected president of the SSRC, Dan Montsitsi, were arrested. Many people didn't go to work and stayed at home to remember their dead. That was the start of the June 16 commemorations which have now become an annual event. In October 1977 the SSRC and eighteen other organisations were banned.

How have things changed while you were in prison?

The main development can be summed up in the word "unity". The development of the trade unions have also created a platform where issues can be discussed. And education is not seen as a separate issue but part and parcel of the struggle.

The most pressing demand for the struggle as a whole, particularly the working class, is that of unity. On the basis of that unity demands like June 16 being a paid public holiday for mineworkers can be attained.



Former Soweto student leader CHRIS MATHABE will never forget the events of June 16

## ANC guidelines on future South Africa:

NUM will debate the African National Congress' Constitutional Guidelines at local, regional and national level.

This was resolved at the Sixth National Congress of the NUM held in Johannesburg during April.

Workers pointed out that the present apartheid constitution was not aimed at protecting the interests of the majority of South Africans.

Apartheid and capitalism can only be ended if a restructuring process, based on the Freedom Charter can begin now. The restructuring should be aimed at achieving a non-racial society and provide a firm basis for national reconciliation and co-operation between different

communities.

The exploitation of workers, which presently continues unabated, can only be ended in a dispensation where the means of production belong to the working class, the Congress pointed out.

"We need to discuss and debate these guidelines because in them lies the the future constitution of South Africa. Unlike all National Party imposed options, the final outcome will be the product of participation", the NUM President, Comrade James Motlatsi said in his opening address at the Congress.

He was supported by Comrade Murphy Morobe who said the guidelines can be an instrument and campaign to encourage debate, discussion and organisation of the constitutional future of our country.

"We need to shape our future today! What we do today will guarantee the direction tomorrow", Comrade Morobe said.

Workers said because the apartheid regime and the racial policies of the National Party have sown deep divisions and encouraged interracial hostilities, there was a need for the Mass Democratic Movement to start discussions with a view of shaping a democratic constitutional dispensation in South Africa.

The National Party has manipulated cultural and language differences among the people of South Africa to enforce division and protect white minority rule.

Product of struggle

The Constitutional Guidelines came about as a result of the massive assault by the oppressed on the apartheid regime between

1984 and early 1987.

The ruling bloc experiencing serious cracks in its ranks came up with promises of reform and negotiation in an attempt to immobilise the struggling masses.

But by its actions the regime made it clear that power would remain in the hands of the white minority, although it was prepared to make certain gestures towards "power-sharing".

This was the background to the decision of the leadership of the ANC to examine different constitutional options and models for a future democratic non-racial South Africa.

The illegitimacy of the apartheid regime and the right of the oppressed to a democratic alternative to apartheid had to be asserted.

The Constitutional Committee of the ANC was formed in

January 1986.

The Guidelines are not meant to substitute the Freedom Charter but to carry it forward.

The Freedom Charter has a central place in the history of the constitutional development of our struggle. In the last ten years it been adopted as a programme by organisations in the democratic movement.

It projects a vision arising out of the struggles and demands of the people, which any future constitution for a non-racial democratic South Africa will be based upon.

The Preamble of the Guidelines emphasises the Guidelines present no changes whatsoever in our demands for full political, economic and social participation in the government of South Africa.