



"Students must organise around their common grievances"
Tshediso Matona, Cosas organiser



"We must support trade union and community struggles."
Toiva Mokgoja, Cosas secretary.



"Our broad aims can only be realised in a non-racial society"
Shepard Mati, Cosas president

Cosas: an organising force in the classrooms

'We've come a long way since '76', says the Cosas executive. Here Saspu National speaks to the executive about Cosas' development, its aims today and the tasks and problems it faces.



The Cosas executive. The 1982 theme is Student-Worker Action

Q: How does the new executive see the role of Cosas?

A: Our general objective is to fight for compulsory, free and democratic education in a democratic society.

To achieve these aims one has to work towards improving relations between parents, teachers and students.

Our broader aims can only be realised within the context of a non-racial society.

We aim to help our communities achieve awareness of society. It is important to perceive Cosas as playing a meaningful role in society as a legitimate and effective force in a broad democratic alliance.

Q: Why did Cosas choose Student-Worker Action as its theme for 1982?

A: Students were realising slowly — after 1978 and 1979 — that they are a specific group and that they play a limited role in the broader struggle. Their role is to support the struggles of workers. One of the aims of Cosas is to teach students that after completion of their studies they have got a role to play in society. Students are the workers of tomorrow and as such they must be educated and organised. The reason that Cosas was formed, was because we realised that our role is actually to support the struggles on other fronts, especially the trade union and community fronts.

The students experience conditions that might be different from the conditions that workers experience, at work and in the

community. We feel that by bringing the workers struggle to the students and the community, students will actually play a very supportive role in the overall struggle led by the workers. That is why our theme is Student-Worker Action.

Q: Do students and workers have a basis for united action?

A: Students are oppressed at school. Workers have grievances at the factory and places of employment. Students and workers in the community have common grievances — unhealthy living conditions etc. We feel that by bringing these two distinct groups together on the basis of a common experience they would form a very strong united front to challenge the system, to expose injustice.

Q: Does the adoption of this theme indicate an advance in student activity?

A: Very importantly. One would not have expected such a theme in the pre-1976 period where students to a large extent thought that they would bring to an end the system of education and also bring about liberation. Students saw themselves as a leading force in the struggle while, ultimately, that was an illusion. We realised our limitations.

Q: How is Cosas organising in the schools?

A: Since the boycotts of 1980, we have made demands for democratic student councils in the schools. To get students involved in the struggle they must be organised. SRC's can organise students around issues they experience at school and show them the importance of

supporting the community. We see ourselves as part of the community and therefore have an obligation to serve the community.

One of our aims in the schools is to improve relations amongst the students themselves. As students we should realise that we are oppressed and have common grievances. We should come together around these common grievances.

We would like the teachers to realise that they are also part of an oppressed community and will have to join with us to fight to end apartheid education.

Q: What immediate problems are you facing?

A: One is the state-induced measure of compulsory education. By introducing compulsory education, the state is forcing parents to pay for their children's tuition.

In a society where exploitation is the order of the day, education must be seen as a weapon used to maintain oppression and inequality. We can never be free until the entire system is eradicated. Compulsory education can only be acceptable when it is free and democratic and will equip students with skills for the betterment of society.

Another problem facing school students is the age limit issue. The age limit states that students over the age of 21 should be forbidden from school and should register with Adult Education Centres. These regulations are in fact a response to 1976 and 1980. They are aimed at controlling activity and getting rid of so-called trouble makers at school.

In all areas where Cosas has branches, this issue was taken up. In Port Elizabeth Cosas took up this issue in conjunction with the parents and organised a survey. A parent-student committee was formed which managed to force the government to suspend the introduction of the age limit.

Q: What is your attitude towards other student organisations?

A: During the earlier stages of Cosas, many students were not clear about their position as regards organisations like Nusas, for instance. Now students are able to analyse the situation more realistically and are able to identify the forces which oppress them — not colour as such but rather economic factors.

We have realised that Nusas sees the situation in the same way as we do. It has democratic aims and foresees a non-racial democratic society which is what we are also struggling for.

It is through day to day experiences in the struggle that students realise the struggle is not against white individuals, but is against the system of oppression and exploitation. There are committed activists amongst the ranks of the white community who have dedicated their lives to the struggle. That this number is limited, we can understand by appreciating the constraints and dynamics of the white community.

Q: And Azaso?

A: As far as Azaso is concerned, it is another Cosas in the universities. Our aims and objectives are the

same in almost all aspects as our grievances and situation are to some extent common. We are working very closely with Azaso.

Q: Does Cosas organise white school students?

A: We have to point out that the conditions of black and white students differ. You will find that in white schools, the issues that they can take up would be of little relevance to black students.

It is not a question of policy, but rather a question of strategy, that students organise separately. It is a creation of the South African system which has caused students to organise like this. We have to organise black students around their grievances and equip them with the means to analyse the situation from a progressive point of view.

Q: How do you view the education system in this country?

A: A system of education in a racist and undemocratic society is only of benefit to the rulers of our country. We feel we have to respond by challenging this indoctrination. We commonly decide what type of education we want by sitting down and formulating our demands and principles.

Take for example the Freedom Charter. There was a time when people were active in rejecting pass laws, and all criminal laws in this country. And so a time came when they saw the need to formulate the Freedom Charter. People submitted their demands and said the only system that will meet their demands is a society where the people govern.

