

Beyond Reform: The Challenge of Change. Nusas July  
Festival Speeches, UCT July 1983

## Sechaba Montsitsi

### Lessons from 1976

Prof has just spoken to us about the education struggle and the role of students. My task is to look at some of the lessons we learned out of our experiences of the activities of 1976. Also, to look at how students were organising at the time and the role played by the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC).

Let me, too, welcome back Clive, Andrew and Keith and before I begin, to say that I feel honoured to be standing in front of our progressive white students. This actually points to the fact that the student movement has undergone a very progressive change. If we look back at the very early period, particularly after the 1968 breakaway when SASO was formed, there were no programmes concerned with black and white students working together, but now we look forward to a very strong unity, a strong alliance. I will start with looking at what we mean by unity and by alliance.

When we speak of unity, we do not speak of an abstract concept, we do not mean the fusion of the AZASO and COSAS executives and the NUSAS executive. No! This would indeed be a marriage of convenience, and neither is unity founded around the table with motions passed and resolutions taken.

Unity is principled. It is based on our theoretical understanding of the political, social and economic struggle we are waging and is forged on the battlefield in the practical situation. Taking an example from our vast and resourceful history, we cite the Xuma-Dadoo Pact of 1947. This led to the development of our struggle for liberation. When the Congress Alliance, ie. the CPC, COD, NIC and ANC were all engaged in the Defiance Campaign of 1952 where all apartheid laws were defied. Here, we see unity in action. We observe unity being forged in the practical situation where

unjust and discriminatory laws are challenged by all.

Now what of our student sector? Action began at the university of Cape Town (UCT), when, early in 1968, Archie Mafeje, a former African student at UCT, was appointed senior lecturer in the School of African Studies. The Minister of Education demanded that this appointment be rescinded, and the University Council complied, although it protested against government intervention. Over 1 000 students and many lecturers protested, and gave their support to some 200 students who staged a sit-in for nine days. On the ninth evening, the demonstrators were raided by right-wing students from UCT and the University of Stellenbosch.

This pledge of solidarity with their fellow students is symbolic of a true and concrete unity forged in the practical situation, it is indicative of the nascent stages of the adoption and adherence to non-racial and democratic principles by the progressive white students.

At the peak of the June 16 unrest at the Wits University students did not fold their arms — they were concerned.

\* On the 4th August 1976 during the stay-away which was called by the SSRC, students at the Wits campus discouraged workers who had slipped through the townships from getting to work.

\* On the 23rd September 1976, their attempt to join a demonstration organised by SSRC in the city centre of Johannesburg was thwarted by the Riot Squad and right-wing students from RAU. These reactionary right-wing students were in cahoots with the Riot Squad to apprehend demonstrators.

\* The stance taken by white campuses on the Quota Bill system deserves commendation also, the preparedness to consistently challenge

unjust laws and discriminatory laws.

\* The anti-Republic Day campaigns are by far the most lucid and significant examples in showing the development of the progressive student movement and the unity forged with trade unions, women's organisations, community organisations and all forces pitting their strength for the establishment of a non-racial and democratic South Africa. The Charter was changed in schools, factories, churches, our humble homes, in streets and in shebeens. This is the unity we recognise — unity in action.

As you will have understood, the 1976 period was very different to today. The philosophy, or shall we call the concept of Black Consciousness — it really clouded our minds. We believed we were correct and were quite firm on the fact that the problem in South Africa was that of race. But, the student movement has developed and changed.

Let us briefly look at the situation in the early sixties after the clamp-down on the ANC and its leadership. We shall remember that there was the massacre of the innocent in Sharpeville, Langa and Guguletu; the widespread arrests throughout the country; many trials nationwide, one of the most prominent being the Rivonia Trial (wherein the true and authentic leadership of the people like Sisulu, Mandela, Kathrada, Goldberg, Mbeki and others, were charged).

This clamp-down on the political organisations did not leave the students unaffected. Some of the members of the African Student Association also fled the country while others like Phokanoka, an executive of that very student association, was arrested, tried, sentenced and sent to Robben Island.

The political vacuum as the result of the banning of the ANC and the general mass repression that was perpetuated by the forces of facism, created a serious situation in the country because the lull was followed by a long period of ideological deterioration, in short, lack of the correct political outlook.

Why do I say the political lull created a long period of degeneration when there were many black consciousness organisations from 1968 to the late 1970s? I am saying this because black consciousness is not an ideology: I am saying this because black consciousness is not a philosophy, it is not a world outlook, it is not able to scientifically analyse the problems that are inherent in our society. I talk of society, I do not mean South Africa and its peculiar apartheid system, no, not at all: I mean the different peoples in various countries who are engaged in the indispensable process of producing basic means for the preservation of life on earth, for the human species. In this situation relations of production are formed, the vast majority produce while a minute minority own the means of production. This is the present

social order under which we live, the capitalist system controlling our present society.

What role can black consciousness play in the liberation struggle for the destruction of capitalism? Of course, none! As we have cited earlier, black consciousness is not a philosophy of liberation. It is a reaction to what is perceived, it is a frantic and emotional outcry for recognition. It is a perpetual emotional outburst not followed by practical action to get rid of the repression and the oppression suffered by the majority of the people in South Africa. It is an old and conservative song of the colour of my skin!

It shall not help to talk of a socialist programme while you still embrace racist ideals. That race is a class determinant factor in the South African situation is a fallacy and a highly idealistic notion. Blacks are not homogenous, they are not all workers and proletariats. We find amongst them a middle class and members of the compradors — those who keep big business enterprise for the benefit of the real bourgeoisie. We also find a strong middle class amongst the coloured people and a petty-bourgeoisie among the Indians. These are different social classes, but to our old school of thought, they are One Azania, One Nation!

We have already explained how this period of political degeneration came about. In essence, if we look at our struggle during the 1920s and 30s we shall realise that there is no difference between what is called black consciousness presently and African nationalism in those times. When the Union of 1910 was established, the British Crown and the Afrikaners declared peace. They saw the new and common threat as the African people, the slogan "swart gevaar" united them.

While the Blacks were denied political, economic and social rights — through this conspiracy they came together and united all tribal groups. They derived their inspiration from this unity and formed a strong bond of Africans fighting to restore their nationhood and brotherhood — the emergence of African Nationalism. This is where the black consciousness is presently — unfortunately for them, times have changed and organisations have developed.

Now let us throw a glance at how the student movement has developed since the early 70s, and see what lessons and experiences we have gained. Before the South African Student Movement (SASM) was formed, there was the African Student Movement (ASM). Its president was Basil Lenkoe and vice-president was Peter Lenkoe. It was formed in 1971 to unite, mobilise and conscientise the students.

In the General Student Council (GSC) of 1972 at Wilgespruit, the student organisation was changed to the South African Student Movement (SASM). Its first president was Mathe

Siseko and his vice-president was William Moloi-sane. We shall realise that SASM pushed through those trying moments of political lull for the next five years, up to its banning on the 19th of October 1977.

During those times there were a lot of problems. These problems were four-fold:

- a) security clampdown generally
- b) problems within our ranks
- c) financial problems
- d) political atmosphere.

These are just briefly some of the problems faced by SASM in trying to organise students.

a) The security had succeeded to some extent to instill fear within students. Many of them were reluctant to attend political meetings and discussions, though we succeeded to get a full house during commemoration services, for example, the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960.

The assaults during interrogation of SASM members in Section Six, also deprived us of young and bright men who got intimidated before they could even be steeled and strengthened. I remember a fellow SASM member and many other students, who were beaten up at John Vorster Square. During those times, what the Security Police used to do was to take you in and beat you up – then they would release you with blue eyes, swollen lips and even limping. This was in order to make an example to others of what would happen to them if they got involved.

b) We worked together with SASO and BPC but unfortunately a lot of grievances emerged which made relations between these two and SASM quite bad. Most articles in the SASM magazines were written by BPC and SASO members instead of SASM members and their supporters at schools. In their addresses to high school students, they used Latin and all forms of jawbreakers. They were not simple and comprehensible, but were always high and divorced from us. These were some of the problems we experienced.

When we asked questions concerning the future programmes of the people, we were told "We have to conscientise the black masses, as this will ensure understanding and support for us, then, we shall be able to bargain from a position of strength". Unfortunately we were not in the mood to bargain or negotiate; we were impatient and militant, and rebellious of the black consciousness leadership. With puffed lips and closed eyes straight from the cells of John Vorster Square, we did not feel like talking, we wanted to fight but did not know how. We made jokes about the leadership when our spirit was high, that they encourage us to conscientise the masses, until they reach a stage where they'll explode

on their own.

This must not be misconstrued with present students whose political understanding is superior, we did not understand then and firmly believed in black consciousness though it was not answering questions to our satisfaction. We were certain then that we were correct and relevant.

c) The financial problems we faced made us unsuccessful to launch SASM throughout the country. I remember an instance in 1973 when we were trying to establish a branch in the Cape. Mafison and two others had to hike their way from Johannesburg to Cape Town; for their trouble, they gained only a gaping wound on Mafison's left hand. That was the only thing they took back to Joburg. Without resources to facilitate mobility, organising can be a problem.

d) The political situation in the country was such that it did not encourage full participation in student politics, nor politics generally. The clampdown of the sixties could still be felt. Most students and youths were lured by the national professional soccer league clubs like Swallows and Pirates. This however is still a problem. Therefore, the general apolitical atmosphere that prevailed during that time even did damage to those few who tried to stand up but could not be sustained and inspired. The present era, however, in terms of political activity, is explosive. The church and priests and involved, women's organisations, sports organisations, the progressive student movement, civic and community organisations and, most importantly, worker organisations/trade unions like SAAWU and GAWU.

These are the problems we experienced during our involvement in the era of black consciousness student organisations.

Another period set in, the period of the June 16 demonstrations. Mistakes were committed in the process and there a victory registered. We shall also see what lessons we drew from those experiences.

Before I commence with a short history of the unrest, I hope we all understand that the political and socio-economic conditions were largely responsible for the spreading of the unrest and the determination with which most black people launched themselves into the unrest. It is in the nature of capitalism, that as it grows and develops, the few owners of the means of production become richer and richer and the masses of the working people become poorer and poorer. In South Africa, the situation becomes worse for those who are super-exploited.

So what the Afrikaans issue did was to spark off the socio-economic time-bomb which exploitation and oppression has manufactured. SASM which was ailing very much, took the opportunity to organise a student meeting on the 13th of June 1976, on a Sunday. In this

meeting students decided to form what they called an action committee to set into action the type of campaign they had proposed. This was a demonstration on the 16th of June in order to protest against Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, and the Bantu education system. But, of course, any government that is undemocratic and unpopular with its people will always resort to force and brutality when challenged, even by peaceful protests.

During the Defiance Campaign of unjust and discriminatory laws in 1952, the government's response was force, arrests and brutality. During the 1960 Pass Campaign the government's response was the same, brutal force.

In 1976 it was worse, a massacre of hundreds, trials throughout the country, thousands fled the country, scores of banning orders and the ultimate banning of all political and student organisations on the 19th of October 1977.

The SSRC was formed on 2nd August 1976. It was essentially a pressure group of student organisation. It was formed of two representative students from every high school and secondary in Soweto. Its task was to mobilise the students and stage campaigns against the education system.

Later, the student organisation took up other issues concerned with community matters. These were the rent increment, the call for the UBC to resign, and the involvement of the working people in our campaigns.

We shall observe that the SSRC was not a politicising student organisation. It had to keep pace with the mood prevalent at the time, that of action after action. Student militancy was at its height and it had to keep up with the constant students' demand for action.

As a result, intense political education was unknown in the student pressure group. However, there was a time when we saw the need to involve the working people through stay-aways and other campaigns, it was clear that as students we could not register victory or stage successful protests without active support of our parents. This move to draw the workers in the students' campaign did not arise out of superior political understanding of the need to involve the working class. We did not know anything about that, but fortunately in practice, we learned that without the masses, without the working people in the forefront, the students alone would not make it.

Before we move onto questions and general discussion, I want to end off by telling you about some experiences I had in 1976 and which left an indelible mark on me.

One were the killings which I saw with my own eyes. I remember one instance when I was standing with a friend at a street corner. Opposite us, a little way down, were two young

boys aged about eight and nine years, walking up the street. A police van with riot police drove down the street. They were pointing rifles at people, playing games — not shooting. As they passed the two young boys, they shot. The eight-year old fell. We rushed across and he was still alive but there was blood all over. He died later because we couldn't find transport to get him to hospital in time. Now some of you may think what we have said here today are fairy tales, but they are real experiences which me and many others went through.

I remember also a schoolfriend who was later sentenced to life imprisonment. At school we knew each other well and often discussed politics, our daily problems and experiences. It happened that during 1976, he decided to leave the country and got involved with the ANC. Another instance, my girlfriend at the time. She was detained during '76 and when she came out she told of the torture she had suffered. The Security Police took her top off and placed electrodes on her breasts. They switched on the current and electricuted her. They kept on doing it thinking that there were things she had not divulged but that she knew about. She, in fact, did not know because she was not centrally involved. The experience made her very bitter and she too left the country.

The newspapers and the SABC tell us that South Africa is under a total onslaught being attacked by outside forces — a communist plot, Russian imperialism. When the students of '76 tried, through a peaceful protest, to show how they detest discrimination and the apartheid system, they were brutally massacred by the SAP. Countless times in our history, peaceful protest has been met with brutal force. The students who once walked the dirty ghettos of Soweto, and were forced to fight with stones are the ones who are now fighting apartheid on our borders.

It is in fact the South African government who has mounted a "total onslaught" against the African people of this country and now also white democrats — Neil Aggett for example.

Now he was a doctor and could easily have earned a big salary. Instead he decided to be involved in worker organisation and the struggle for democracy in South Africa. He also still worked as a doctor and assisted many patients in clinics in Soweto. Speaking to some of his patients, they told us that he was a very kind person and don't understand how he got detained in the first place. He created a great impression and lots of people still talk about him.

To end off my talk — at the next June 16 commemoration we must have progressive white students — have a Kate Philip addressing us at Regina Mundi — just as I am addressing you here. These are the nascent stages of non-racialism.