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An Assessment of the Organisation,
Work and Political Direction of the
ANC Education Department

1. INTRODUCTION:

The ANC Education Department was established at a meeting, held at Mazimbu in October 1978, of representatives of existing ANC Education Committees operating in a number of different countries (Tanzania, Swaziland, Zambia, USA., Great Britain). The meeting was under the Chairmanship of Comrade Sindiso Mfenyana who had been appointed by the NEC as Coordinating Secretary for ANC Education with the task of organising the Education Department and establishing an ANC School at Mazimbu.

Although, then, the Department has been in existence for only some 12 months, nonetheless, it has already held two Council Meetings, established the basic education policy of the ANC, proposed a structure for the Education Department and set up the school at Mazimbu. These are no mean achievements and their significance cannot be overestimated for they have, for the first time, involved the ANC in the task of organising education for our youth and cadres and this has obliged us to begin to face, in a direct and systematic way, questions about the role, content and structure of education.

Until recently, our policy on education was restricted to the general demands of the Freedom Charter and to a general rejection of racism and the deprivations of Bantu Education. Following Soweto 1976, young people expressed their total rejection of Bantu Education by turning to our movement to provide them with the basic knowledge denied them in South Africa. Our Movement had to respond to this political initiative of the youth, and it did so by deciding to establish an ANC School. This immediately raised a number of questions: What should be the purpose of an ANC School? What should it teach? How should it be organised?

In an attempt to deal with these questions a number of documents, containing proposals about the content and purpose of education at the school, were prepared in London, Lusaka and Dar es Salaam. The common characteristic of all these proposals was the utterly conventional position they adopted - while, correctly, insisting upon the provision of 'basic knowledge', they argued for an education which, while apparently free of political content, in fact, merely reproduced the bourgeois conception of education as a process outside of politics and therefore supposedly neutral to the political and ideological struggles of the people. Towards the end of 1977 a totally different view began to emerge from the Dar es Salaam Education Committee. The starting point of the Dar Committee's approach was a recognition of the deeply political nature of education; a rejection of the conception that education is a 'technical' matter to be left to the educational experts; an explicit insistence that the ANC School must be a school for political cadres.

We must recognise that the task of developing a correct theory and practice of education is an extremely difficult one, particularly at this early stage, since in the absence of a worked out position we tend to approach the matter on the basis of conventional ideas derived from our own experience and the dominant conceptions in the societies in which we live. One extremely deeply entrenched approach to education in our Movement, is to see it as a "technical" question best left to the expert teachers - the school, in this approach, is viewed as a place where basic knowledge is transmitted without considering the relationship of that knowledge to political and ideological purposes or the political effects of democratic or hierarchical structures in the school and so on.

It was no accident, then, that the entire debate at the first Council Meeting revolved around the complex issues of the political versus the technical approach to education.

At times the issues were explicit and at other times implicit. In relation to certain questions there was immediate agreement. In other instances, more particularly where the political content of the issue was implicit (for example, the relationship between staff and students and the organisational structure of the school), the assumption of the non-political character of the school and of education asserted itself. It was, however, one of the fundamental achievements of the Council meeting that these assumptions were brought to the surface, debated, and a correct political solution found.

The importance of the Council's discussions and decisions on these points cannot be over-emphasised for unless the school is established, from the very beginning, on a firmly political and democratic basis, it cannot fulfill its specific functions as an ANC school. What the first Council Meeting succeeded in doing was, precisely, to establish both the general political character of the school by defining the basic aims and principles of the ANC education and the organisational basis necessary to put into practice those aims and principles. This is reflected in the following decisions of the First Council Meeting:-

- (1) The Education Policy of the African National Congress as laid down by the Council stated, among other things:-

General Aims of the ANC Education Policy

The entire educational programme, under the direction, guidance and control of the NEC of the ANC will be geared towards the following objectives:-

- 1) To prepare cadres to serve the national liberation struggle of the people of South Africa in the phase of struggle for seizure of political power.
- 2) To produce such cadres as will be able to serve society in all spheres, i.e. political, economic, socio-cultural, educational and scientific. Priorities will be dictated by the needs of the liberatory struggle in the pre- and post liberation period.

General Principles

"The policy should be geared towards producing a new type of South African dedicated to serve the interests and needs of the South African people as a whole".

"While observing the priority to impart basic knowledge at each given level in each field, the programme shall promote the full creative and democratic participation of students, teachers and the community in all educational activities".

- (2) The Council understood that while the provision of "basic knowledge" was itself a political act of rejection of Bantu Education, nonetheless, it was necessary to ensure that the syllabuses contained a correct political perspective to guide both teachers and pupils. Therefore it was agreed:-
- (a) That the syllabuses on basic education should be drawn up to embody the general political outlook of the ANC.
 - (b) That "there should be a separate subject dealing with the development of the South African liberation struggle. It was to be one of the compulsory subjects to be taught to all students attending the school so that they became aware of the history and development of the struggle, including its strategy and tactics".
- (3) It was further recognised that certain organisational structures were necessary internally in the school and in the relation of the school to the ANC to ensure both the democratic nature of the school and its integration with ANC policy and needs.

(a) The Internal Organisation of the School.

Briefly, the decisions of the Council were:-

- (i) That the School Administration should be conducted by an Administrative Committee composed of the Director of the Project, the Principal, Political Commissar, Bursar, School Secretary and representatives of all sections of staff and students.
- (ii) That there should be a school committee consisting of the Director, Political Commissar, Principal, Co-ordinating Secretary of the ANC Education Department, the Education Officer, and representatives of the staff, treasurer of ANC, the RPC in Tanzania, and the students. The function of this Committee were specified as follows:-

"... the School Committee is to prepare quarterly reports for the NEC on the functions and activities of the Administrative Committee and to ensure that the programmes at the school adhere to the political content of the institute".

- (iii) Every residential block at the school was not only to have a good mixture of both staff and students but was to have attached to it a Political Commissar whose it would have to ensure the politicalisation of the residents and the correct political handling of internal problems.

(b) The Organisational Structure of the Education Department

- (i) It was recognised that the school had to be linked to the ANC as a whole and to the NEC in such a way as to ensure that it would serve the needs of the different departments of the ANC in the course of the liberation struggle.

This link was to be through the National Education Council which was to meet once a year and to be composed of: ANC President, Secretary General, Treasurer General, Co-ordinating Secretary, Representative of the International Affairs Department, Women's Section, Youth Secretariat, Education Council, Medical Committee, SACTU and the Education Officer.

- (ii) Finally, the Education Council, consisting of representatives from the various Education Committees, was to meet twice a year. Its functions were to:-

Plan the establishment and development of the Mazimbu School. Consider, in between meetings of the National Education Council, reports from the School and the work of the Education Department.

Make recommendations on staff recruitment.

Consider plans or projects for the development of ANC education.

Consider the relationship between the Education Department and other ANC departments.

Make recommendations on method of recruiting students.

(4) Staff and Student Recruitment

- (a) The principles laid down at the Council Meeting were intended to ensure that staff recruited to work at the school were of the highest possible political calibre. To this end the following was agreed:-

That the criterion to be employed in the recruitment of members of the staff should be that of finding people, who are not only South Africans but ANC members. Any deviation from this general rule would be carefully examined on merit.

The Umkhonto we Sizwe was identified as the one of the suitable sources from which to recruit the teaching staff. The MK cadres were preferred both because of their knowledge of the organisation and for their high level of discipline.

An effort was therefore to be made to obtain the cooperation of the Revolutionary Council to assist in this connection.

"The Education Committee had the duty to approach suitable ANC members in their respective areas with the necessary teaching qualifications and experience and recommend them accordingly".

The Education Department was to be the 'body to consider suitable people and forward their names to the NEC for endorsement'.

(b) Again, in order to ensure that appropriate students be recruited, it was agreed:

That delegations be immediately sent to the neighbouring countries to check on the situation concerning numbers of students.

The delegations will also ensure that reception committees are set up in those countries, so that they constitute the first line of selection.

It was recommended that initiation centres be set up in Maputo and Lusaka from where students would be selected for our school.

The Chairman is mandated to discuss this matter conclusively with the leadership.

It is clear that all the above mentioned decisions were directed towards giving effect to a political conception of the school. However, the struggle to develop ANC education is not won by a single set of decisions, it has to be worked for, precisely because of the tendency for incorrect and outmoded conceptions to reassert themselves. It was precisely this tendency which has appeared in the work of the Education Department and at the April Council Meeting.

The Council Meeting, April, 1979

- (1) The major achievements of the April Meeting were (a) the actual establishment of the school as a functioning organisation despite the present inadequacy of buildings, equipment, staff and so on.
(b) the adoption of all major syllabuses prepared by the different education committees; (c) the taking of a number of technical decisions regarding student progress forms, registration and so on.
- (2) At the same time it must be noted that:-

- (i) The Council did not properly review the work of the Education Department since the first Council Meeting and it becomes clear that in certain important respects the decisions of that meeting had not been adhered to.
- (ii) A number of political decisions and approaches adopted at the first meeting were reversed without adequate discussion. It is important to point out that the failure to either properly review, the work as discussed, the decisions was partly related to the extremely poor organisation of the meeting. We do not want here to dwell on the continuous changes of the date and the proposed length of the meeting, the failure to make air bookings, the failure to provide food after arrival in Dar es Salaam, the absence of food at the conference venue on the first day and so on. We merely note that the effect of this was not only considerable uncertainty but also resulted in some Education Committees (Dar and Maputo) not being represented at all during the major formal sessions of the meeting.

Of equal importance, was the fact that no agenda was circulated prior to the meeting. Indeed, the agenda which had been prepared was inadvertently not brought to the meeting which was delayed for some hours and finally when the agenda was read out, delegates had only 5 or 10 minutes to consider it. Thus, none of the delegates was properly prepared for the meeting.

Furthermore, although it was originally planned to meet for a minimum of 5 days, in the event, at the start of the meeting (2p.m. on the Sunday), it was announced that it would have to end at lunch time on Tuesday. The result was, given the large agenda, an extremely rushed meeting with little time for adequate consideration of the aims involved.

- (b) This was the context of the Second Council Meeting. It was in this context that a series of retreats from the political and democratic conceptions laid down were able to pass virtually unchallenged.

(i) Staff Recruitment

Although it was reiterated by the Coordinating Secretary at the meeting that our approach to the recruitment must be political and that only after having satisfied ourselves that the person was acceptable on this basis, should they be approached, in fact it is clear that this approach was not adhered to and certainly the priorities laid down by the First Council Meeting were not followed. In particular for example, London was instructed to interview two applicants on the basis of their skills although they were known to have connections with a political movement hostile to the ANC.

Furthermore, at least one of the teachers appointed has a very non-political approach to education and operates within conventional, authoritarian relation with the pupils.

In general, in presenting a list of proposed staff, apparently agreed to by the NEC, the Coordinating Secretary produced no information about the political adequacy of the persons concerned and the Council, for its part, did not take up the issue. Given the crucial role which the teachers will obviously play, this failure to discuss the political stance, organisational work and general suitability of the different recruits was a serious omission. The utmost care and attention must be given to the appointment of staff and this requires full discussion at the appropriate levels. The failure to do this can only open the way to the recruitment of unsatisfactory staff.

The suggestion referred to in the preceding sub-section regarding the appointment of the Vice-Principal as a Welfare Officer is, thus, also a retreat from politics in this respect.

(c) The Functioning of the Education Department

The First Council Meeting stressed the necessity for the democratic organisation of the school and the Department of Education.

In this respect, the decisions of the First Council Meeting have not been fully complied with.

- (i) There is no indication that a meeting of the National Education Committee is to take place.
- (ii) The Council of Education has not been involved in important decisions with which it should have been concerned. For example the recruitment and appointment of staff.
- (iii) There are no indications that the School Committee and the School Administration Committee have been established.
- (iv) The Regional Education Committees (REC's) are not being made fully involved in the Department of Education and Culture, in particular in the exercise of their political function. It is tempting now now that the school is in operation, to consider their main function to be that of raising money and equipment and solidarity work. This is shortsighted as it will divorce our education from the movement as a whole and thereby strengthen the tendency to treat education as a technical matter.

The moral and enthusiasm of the members of the Regional Education Committees is dependent on their total, democratic involvement in the work of the Department of Education. On the practical level it is important that there is better 4-way communication between the HQ, the School, the Education Officer and the Regional Education Committees. Instead of regular briefings from the HQ, we often have to rely on informal reports from those passing through a Region.

Thus:

The London Education Committee has heard informally that a report on education was recently issued from HQ. It has not received this report.

We have also heard that a Political Commissar has been appointed for the whole of Tanzania, including the School. Assuming this is true, it is certainly not, as stated earlier, in line with the decision of the First Council Meeting which felt that the Political Commissar should be integrated in the teaching programme and activities at Mazimbu. Moreover, it is humanly impossible for one person to serve in that capacity for the entire region.

Other reports we have received suggest that authoritarian relationships are developing in Mazimbu and that this is leading to polarisation.

Furthermore, according to some reports, teachers at the school are to be paid salaries. The payment of a salary to teachers undermines not only the political content of the very act of taking up a teaching appointment, but in addition threatens to raise problems in relation to other ANC activities.

We do not know if these reports are accurate but they touch on crucial issues and point to the fact that the Education Council is not being allowed to carry out its functions by virtue of the failure (a) to keep the NEC's informed on all aspects and (b) to involve them in the work of the Education Department as was laid down by the First Council Meeting.

It follows that channels of communication within the Department must be improved immediately, with a firm lead from the HQ.

CONCLUSION

In this report we have attempted to outline certain developments and tendencies within the Department of Education which we feel require urgent discussion at all levels in the Movement.

We propose that the Third Council Meeting and the National Education Council be convened as soon as possible for the purpose of discussing the issues we have raised above in order that a clear lead be given to the school administration and to the whole movement on the question of education. The line which began to emerge at the First Council Meeting and which was exemplified in the school syllabuses needs to be discussed and elaborated in relation to all spheres of our educational work.

London Education Committee
October 1979.