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STUDENT STRUGGLES DURING THE 1980,s : AN
OVERVIEW AND ASSESSMENT

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The past decade in South Africa has been characterised by unprecedented opposition to Nationalist Party rule.

One salient feature has been the proliferation of a myriad of organisations throughout the country. These were mostly sectoral in nature and embraced constituencies like students, youth, women, labour and the church. the mode of protest included strikes, stayaways, school and consumer boycotts.

The education arena is one where the legitimacy of the state has been severely challenged. This resulted in the employment of soldiers within the schools as a means to restore law and order. This paper focus on education protest in an attempt to present an overview of the situation in the country during the past decade.

Issues to be explored in the course of this paper include the emergence and importance of student organisations, struggles taken up, state responses to the student movement and a critique of student struggles.

Importance of student organisation

Within the student sector organisations were created at both a school and tertiary level. These were the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), the Azanian Students, Organisation (AZASO), the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the Azanian Students Movement (AZASM).

The education struggles of the eighties differed from those of the previous decades in a number of ways. Firstly, it involved many more students than was previously the case secondly, it was not an urban based phenomenon but penetrated the rural and often the remotest villages in South Africa, thirdly, the demands articulated went beyond the educational and were often political in character and fourthly, joint action was often embarked upon by students, workers and the community

It was particularly the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the Azanian Student Organisation (AZASO) ushered in a new phase in student resistance, i.e. mass - based struggles through organised formations. My reference to these two organisations is not to suggest that there were no others functional; often organisations belonged either

to those who adhered to Freedom Charter or those within the Black consciousness tradition. However, the latter were of a lesser kind, certainly insofar as it relates to membership, campaigns taken up and harassment from the state.

struggles taken up

The issues taken up by the student movement resolved around two issues : one, the content and quality of education and two, the structures designed to implement these notably the Department of Education and Training. Pertaining to the first aspect, this involved

- . overcrowded classes

- . insufficient and under-qualified teachers
- . lack of textbooks
- . an end to corporal punishment
- . an end to sexual harassment of female students
- . an end to age restrictions

Linked to this is the undemocratic ethos within schools; the abhorrence of the imposed prefect system and the demand for democratically elected SRCs. The DET countered by offering PRCs but this was rejected as puppet structures.

The DET had later agreed to the establishment of SRCs

but its vision differed from that of COSAS in a few respects. The DET was more concerned about the technical aspects of SRCs e.g. communication within the schools, enforcement of school rules, the exercise of discipline, loyalty and respect, punctuality, academic thoroughness, morality, co-operation and participation in school activities.

The vision that COSAS had was more nuanced. It envisioned both SRC and staff to instill responsibility, determination, far-sightedness and dignity into students, activate

them in matters affecting them concerning school activities, represent students whenever necessary

and the promotion of student development at grassroots level.

Years of fire, years of ash

The year 1984 was a particularly turbulent year in the history of South Africa. The increase in general sales Tax (GST) in July and the election for the Tricameral Parliament in August, the latter an attempt by the state to co-opt the coloured and Asian sections of the Black community excluding the Africans provided issues which were challenged in all earnesty.

On the day of the elections an estimated number of 800,000 students boycotted classes throughout South Africa. This included an estimated number of 630,000 coloured students.

Discontent loomed large in the Vaal triangle over the proposed increase in service charges. In September about 140,000 students boycotted classes but this number had increased to 220,000 students by October. The Vaal Stayaway Committee, a coalition of labour, student, women and religious organisations organised a successful Stayaway from work on the 5-6 November. By the end of October it was estimated that 220,000 students were not attending classes throughout the country.

State repression intensified as it attempted to deal with the ongoing school crisis. COSAS

branches called on pupils to continue class boycotts in response to detention of students

. The demands now articulated were of an overt political nature. These were the rescission of the State of Emergency declared on July 21 and the removal of the SAP and SADF

from townships. The demand for the replacement of the existing curriculum to be replaced with a curriculum of peoples education gained momentum throughout the country.

The year 1985 did not see any decline in the wave of militant protest which engulfed the country the previous year.

In the Western Cape class boycotts started in Cape Town on 23 July and by mid-August had spread to 63 educational institutions which included schools in Worcester, Paarl and Oudtshoorn (W.I.P ??). This boycott was primarily a response to the declared state of emergency in other parts of the country. An important achievement was the solidarity from teachers who decided to strike for two days and assisted with alternative programs, a decision which emanated from a mass meeting representative of 79 schools (Ibid).

The breakdown in the education system compelled the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) to convene a special education conference in July 1985 to resolve student grievances. The conference, convened under the theme 'Peoples education for People,s power, reveals the extent to which educational and political issues became intertwined during this period. The conference was the first attempt by forces across the political spectrum to resolve the national education crisis.

The twelve resolutions passed at this conference addressed itself to both political and educational issues. These dealt with the Mayday National stayaway, the June 16 National stayaway , Inkhata, political prisoners, disinvestment, decisive mass action like rent and

consumer boycotts, conditions of working women and pre-school education, as well as

the US. policy of constructive engagement. The resolutions which had a bearing on education called for

'i the unbanning of COSAS, and called on students to plan for national united action to give effect to this declaration;

'i an end to repressive measures against teachers and urged all obstructive organisations and teachers to stop their repressive roles and collaboration with authorities against democratic teachers;

" students to return to school even though their demands have not been met (NECC Resolutions, 1985)

Although the demands for people's education became accentuated during this period, the conference did not spell out its content, resources and ways to implement this in schools

. This only emerged from speeches of educationists and education structures.

In the Eastern Cape the periodic or total school boycotts

the previous year meant that students did not write examinations. In 1985 the Eastern Cape Students' Congress shifted its focus from protest to the consolidation of structures and alternative education programs. Twenty nine structures were existent and others were still in the process of formation.

A high level of support was enjoyed with the establishment of SRCs, with extensive discussion on its constitution and role. Students enjoyed the support from teachers and headmasters in this regard. The same could not be said about viz-a-vis Parent-Teacher-

Student Associations (PTSA,s). It was cited that tparents were still conservative , especially those teachers who are still part of AtasaKibid).

The consolidation of structures did not divert attention from demands which have not been met, i.e. the occupation of townships by the SAP and SADF, inadequate and no free stationary as well as the continued detention of students. A three day protest was held over the period 11-13 March aimed at pressurising the BET to concede to demands (Saspu National 15). During this period alternative programs were held which focused on topics like peoplets education, the education charter campaign, SRCis, the Freedom Charter and the role of students in the national democratic struggle.

The class boycotts in Cape Town during 1985 was largely in response to the declared state of emergency in the country. It started in July 1985 and continued for several months, up to the point where the writing and administering of exams became a divisive issue. Wecsco called on pupils not to write and Wectu, the newly formed teacherts association, called on teachers not to administer exams. With so little teaching taking place exams were considered fraudulent and anti -educational.

During 1986 there existed a lull in student activity and organisation. The gains made the previous year were not consolidated as there were no evidence of the deepening of political awareness or the building of solid student structures. The issue over examinations also proved to be divisive (W.I.P. 1988). One explanation for the failure to consolidate the gains of the previous year centres around the issue of immediacy,the belief by students that freedom was just around the corner. The strength and resilience

of the state was naively underestimated.

In 1988 another crisis reared its head in the Western cape. Its origins can be traced to Langa High school where the Department of education and Training (DET) attempted to transfer students to other schools due on the grounds that they were overcrowded and also the refusal of students to participate in a DET sports tour in Natal. The latter aspect resulted in physical attacks involving students and teachers.

The protests, spearheaded by the Western Cape Studentsi Congress (Wecsco) soon spread and involved an estimated 100,000 students throughout the peninsula. Its culmination was a three-day protest action over the period 25-27 April. Solidarity was displayed by

students from the Boland region, which included schools in Mbekweni and Zwelethemba, and the West coast which included schools in Saldanha, Piketberg and Atlantis.

By this time demands put forward by Wecsco previously have still not been met. These demands were

't that locked-out students be reinstated

1' an end to the blue-card system restricting access to a school grounds

't that Manenberg teachers and students be allowed to organise democratically

ew'ithout interference

t that suspended teachers be unconditionally reinstated and teachers be immediately released

" the right to peaceful protest in the form of marches and rallies

t the lifting of restrictions on the NECC and Cosatu

(W.I.P, 84, 1988).

State responses to the student movement

The situation developed to the extent where schooling was literally enforced. Schools became de facto military concentration camps. This denied a situation for effective schooling.

Many students were detained and imprisoned for long periods, especially during the three states of emergency between 1985-1989. During incarceration they were subjected to various kinds of torture. Many lost their lives in the process. Hundreds were either maimed or lost their lives in the process. There is no reliable estimate as to how many were teargassed or batoncharged in the process.

Faced with such formidable opposition from the education sector, the state had to devise means to defeat this force. One way of doing this was to recruit students to resort to the use of spies. Loose security arrangements resulted in these organisations being vulnerable to infiltration. Thus, it was able to get access to information that was meant to be confidential.

In order to deal with the challenge to its legitimacy the state ultimately banned student organisations. The COSAS was banned in 1985 and unbanned in 1990. Other organisations or its leaders were served with severe restriction orders.

A critique of student struggles.

The struggles of the eighties introduced the element of mass participation in struggle. In

most cases the different mass meetings, workshops, etc. served as schools of democracy. Students had the opportunity to not only criticise the existing system, but developed ideas

around the need for an alternative system. Thus the process emanated from below unlike the situation where the government often imposed its ideas onto people.

Students came to realise how society functions. They were able to see how their struggles are linked to that of the wider society and made efforts to engage in joint action.

The collapse of the oppressive Apartheid machinery in the townships saw the emergence of rudimentary forms of people's power. This ranged from street committees to people's courts to consumer boycott committees which addressed issues faced by the community.

Often students were involved in these

either as individuals or through their organised formations.

The consistent and prolonged class boycotts resulted in a waste of time, in most cases an academic year. Most students became demoralised, dropped out of school and were absorbed into the cheap labour force. The economic needs of the country are such that it requires a Black skilled labour force. At Black universities where conservative and

racist administrations were intact, continued boycotts over issues which could best be described as tunwinable, often resulted in mass expulsions from these campuses. This practise was often repeated. These boycotts no doubt fostered bonds of solidarity, but the long term losses by far outweighs this accomplishments.

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Pogt-script

This paper does not constitute a complete overview of education struggles during the 1980s. It is based on the data assembled so far for this project. Any new data collected which relates to the research topic will be incorporated into the present paper. Naturally the paper would go through phases of metamorphosis, as has been the case hitherto.