

1976 SOWETO UPRISING: The BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA

Nicole Ulrich

It was during the Soweto Uprising that South African youth started to play a leading role in the fight against apartheid. They taught us that we can make a difference and change the injustices in our world. We need to commemorate their bravery and learn from their struggles by remembering the 1976 student protests.

At the beginning of the 1970s growing inflation and increasing unemployment led to much discontent amongst urban Black youth. This discontent was fuelled by the under-funded, racist, and authoritarian government institutions such as the local government administration of the townships and the Bantu Education system. Conditions in township schools were particularly problematic.

Although the government and large companies such as Anglo American increased spending on education to grow the semi-skilled workforce during the early 1970s, schools for Black students remained under resourced and over crowded. These schools did not have adequate teaching staff or facilities (such as libraries, sports grounds, etc.) and ranked the highest in terms of drop out rates and the lowest in teacher to student ratios. Corporal punishment was also used extensively and in many cases took sadistic forms. At Vulamabuzuko Higher Primary School in Diepkloof, for instance, teachers frequently punished students by placing their feet in cold water and then whipping their toes with leather strips.

Students were brought closer together by their shared frustrations and they started to look for ways in which they could express and resolve their grievances. Neither parents, nor the exiled organisations such as the ANC and PAC provided them with much direction. As a result, Black youth established their own organisations such as the African Student Movement (ASM), which organised students in Soweto schools and aimed to take up student demands and create social and political awareness.

Members of ASM were increasingly influenced by groups of young teachers from universities such as Turfloop who promoted Black Consciousness. Drawing on the ideas of intellectuals such as Steve Biko, they believed that it was necessary to instill a feeling of pride and self worth within Black people before earnest political organisation could take place. Before long the ASM changed its name to the South African Student Movement (SASM) and sought to organise beyond Soweto by building a national movement for African, Indian and Coloured youth.

There were also other important events that inspired Soweto youth at this time. The 1973-4 Durban strikes, which spread to Port Elizabeth and the East Rand, shattered the political quiescence of 1960s and signalled the re-emergence of the Black trade union movement. With the additional collapse of Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique and Angola, many started to believe that national liberation within South

Africa was increasingly possible.

Through the efforts of the SASM, Soweto students were becoming more politically aware, but there were two key events that spurred them into action. Firstly, government spending on education was decreased at the same time that the number of schooling years was reduced. The abolition of standard six resulted a huge 'bulge' of students being pushed into the first year of secondary school. This contributed to overcrowding of schools and placed strain on diminishing resources.

Secondly, the Bantu Education department sought to implement a new 'fifty - fifty' language policy. This meant that half of the exam subjects were going to be taught in Afrikaans. Many teachers did not speak Afrikaans and the

introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction would clearly lead to a deterioration in teaching standards and students performance. Students were reluctant to learn Afrikaans because they considered it to be the language of officials within the apartheid state and their oppressors.

School boards were the first to take up the battle against the state's language regulation, but the educational authorities were unbending. The stubbornness of the Department of Bantu Education became the focus of student's political anger. As early as February 1976, students already started organising protests and a mass demonstration was organised for the 16th of June. About fifteen thousand youths responded to the call and gathered for the

demonstration. Many displayed their hostility towards the language policy by waving placards such as, 'Blacks are not dustbins - Afrikaans stinks' and 'Afrikaans is oppressors language'.

Police had made no preparations for the event and their early mornings attempts to head off some of the large groups of demonstrating youth proved to be ineffective. At about 9 o'clock that morning police confronted a cheerful and carefree crowd of demonstrators on Vilakasi street. In an attempt to disperse the demonstrators, the police fired tear gas into the crowd, but failed to dissuade the demonstrators, who responded by throwing stones. Rather than retreat, the police shot into the crowd, killing two children and injuring several others.

The brutal display of force by the police ignited the fury of the young marchers and by midday rioting had broken out in Soweto: cars were stoned and barricades erected; arson attacks took place on administration buildings, schools, and beer halls, and two white men were attacked and killed. Despite the police's heavy-handed methods used to try and suppress the uprising, riots continued in Soweto and quickly spread to other parts of the country.

The 1976 uprising marked the beginning of a new area. Although the costs were high, Soweto students showed that political action and mobilisation was possible. This stimulated the re-emergence of political organisation and resistance within South Africa and, in so doing, undermined apartheid.

