

Tough choices: Wuthering Heights or picketing in the rain?



The country's first teachers' strike – in the Western Cape – had its lighter moments. 'Rank and file' Sadtu member ZARINA ROSSOUW (left) recalls events from the two-week action.

THIS is the first time in almost six years that I have written anything not related to schoolwork (prepping, setting exam papers, etc) and I've just realised how difficult it is. As I've never claimed to be an intellectual, this view of the teachers' strike called by Sadtu on May 24 is as seen through the eyes of a rank and file Sadtu member.

Wednesday, 19 May

Sadtu site meeting, first interval, library: The call to strike has been made. Are we going to strike or not? What do we do about the pupils? Can we go on strike and still be in our classes? No, that's a chalk-down, not a strike, comrade! (we've become "comrades", we're not "miss" or "sir" any longer.)

Comrades, in terms of the question of striking or not, because we are members of a union, we have to adhere to our union's call! But com we need more time to discuss this issue (we've taken to the habit of discussing "issues"). I think time has run out, com, can we reach consensus? If we go on strike, remember "no work, no pay". But what about my subsidy com? Also remember that we can't enter a classroom nor have any contact with the pupils. But can we still talk to them? Not on educational matters of course.

Right, have we reached consensus, com chair? Can we have the POA (programme of action, for the uninitiated in strugglespeak) for Monday? 7.30 am – picketing in front of school gates; 7.55 am – meet in the staffroom (strike HQ).

Saturday, 22 May

I hope our demands are met and the strike is called off. I still have to complete the nature of love in *Wuthering Heights* before the literature exam on Wednesday.

Will there still be an exam?

Sunday, 23 May

A leading Sunday newspaper has reported that the national Sadtu strike has been called off – it seems our demands have been met.

(At least I can sleep for an extra 30 minutes tomorrow morning!)

Monday, 24 May

7.45 am: I'm met by "Teacher on Strike" placards at the school gates. What's happening? I'm not on strike. The newspaper said that the strike was called off!

No, com, that's the problem – DON'T BELIEVE THE MEDIA!

The weekend meeting did not address the problems of the Western Cape particularly (i.e. the questions of rationalisation and retrenchments). Sadtu (Western Cape region) decided to go ahead with a strike in their region.

I don't know, I was prepared to strike, but then I read the newspaper yesterday and now...

It's not a question of being prepared com, follow your conscience. But what about Catherine and Heathcliff?

Your conscience, comrade...

10.00 am: What about the literature exam scheduled for Wednesday?

What can I do? Can't I just spend an hour with my matriculants?

Comrades, this is serious – WE'RE ON STRIKE!

Send a delegation and a letter to the office requesting a postponement of the examination! But what if it's not successful? Can't I just have half an hour with them? Comrade, that will be discussed after the delegation returns.

Childhood" that it was only in the 17th century that the concept of childhood arose which stressed innocence and weakness, and became linked with the idea of subservience or dependence. Noting that historically children have been involved in political issues, he says that of "all oppressed groups in society, children have perhaps the hardest task in asserting their right to equality. Indignation is often expressed that women or blacks are treated like children, but not so often that children are treated the way they are".

In "Down with Childhood", Shulamith Firestone explains how the fiction of childhood parallels the fiction of femininity. Both women and children were considered asexual and thus "purer" than men. Their inferior status was ill-concealed under an elaborate "respect" while both were considered mentally deficient. The pedestal of adoration on which both were set made it hard for them to breathe. Moreover, because the class oppression of women and children is couched in the phraseology of "cute" it is much harder to fight than open oppression.

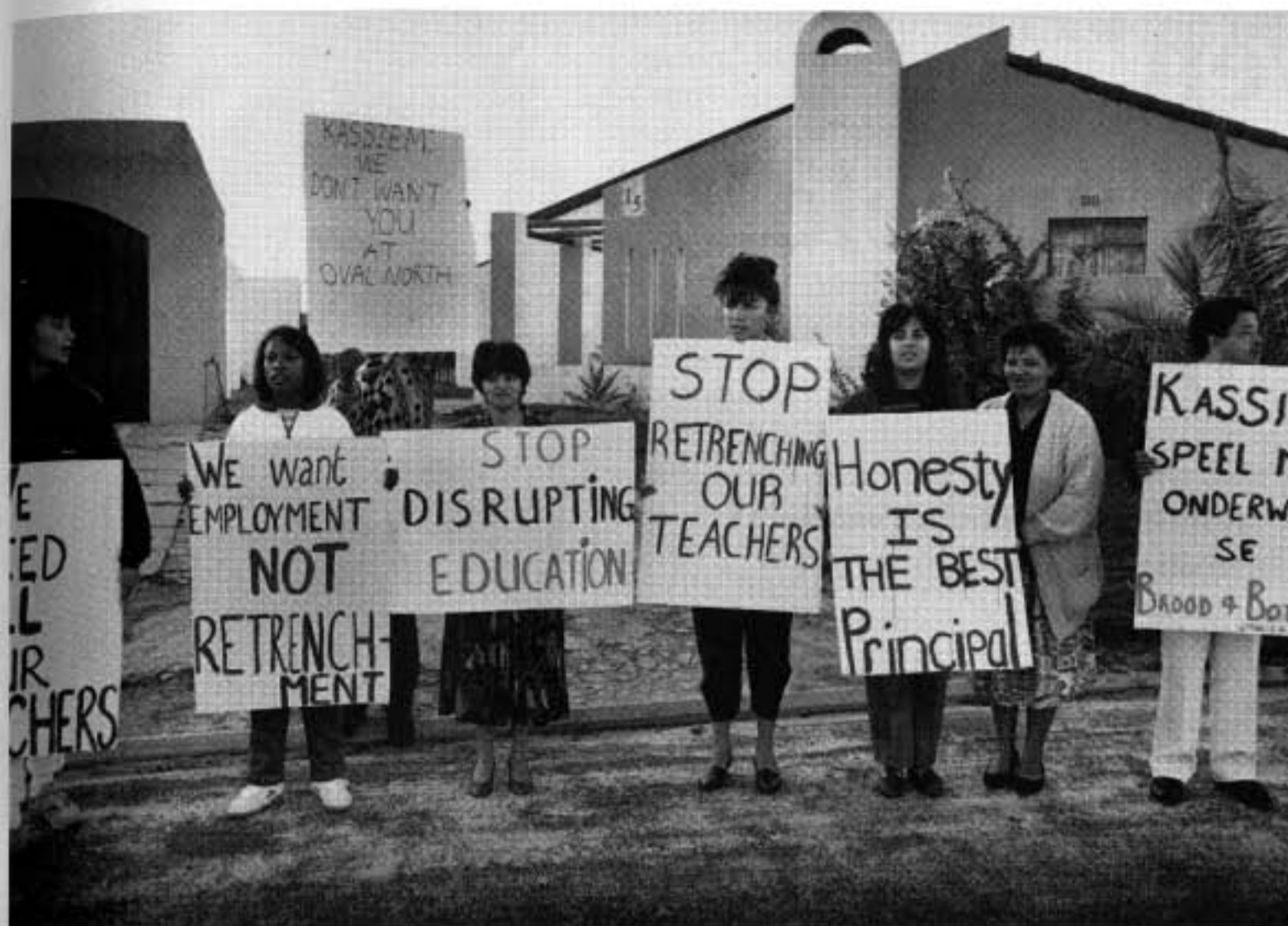
A final similarity to note in reactions could be called the prophecies of doom, the predictions of total chaos that people warn would be the inevitable result of such "absurd notions" being taken seriously. Contemporary readers are warned from the right that "the blacks are calling for the vote for 14-year-olds because they want to make South Africa ungovernable", and from the left (Azapo) that "we must find a way of accommodating the youth while not ending up with a monster that could swallow us all".

The monster threatening to swallow the nation in 1877 was "petticoat government". A few years later in 1891, Samuel Smith, MP, was saying: "If we abandon the caution of the Anglo-Saxon race, and plunge into wild experiments like woman's suffrage, I much fear that dark days will befall this nation, and that the splendid fabric of centuries will totter to its fall".

How would it change things for children to have the vote? How, for example, would it affect the situation and problems and needs of the 100 million streetchildren in the world if those in power depended on them for their vote?

Could it be that we don't want to let children vote for the same reasons men didn't want to let women vote? That we want to keep children as an oppressed, disenfranchised "class"? Could it be that in another 70 years from now, we might be amazed and embarrassed that there could have been a time that people did not consider it "right" and "normal" for children to have the vote?

Anne Schuster is a writer who has done research on children's rights and children in courts.



Maximum visibility ... teachers demonstrate against rationalisation.

SOUTHRIGHT

Volunteers for the delegation? Volunteers for a zonal meeting this afternoon?

Tuesday, 25 May

7.30 am: Placard demonstrating at this hour, in the pouring rain is definitely a sign of that dedication that we are renowned for.

How much longer com!?

8.00 am: Thank you for being so punctual this morning comrades, however, as for some comrades...

Can we have a report-back from the delegation to the office, comrades? No definite answer yet?

What about the exams! I'm only asking for half an hour, comrades! Are the pupils prepared for this exam tomorrow? Yes, just give me half an hour!

11 am: The Sadtu site has been visited by three concerned teachers from a neighbouring school. There are rumours that we aren't on strike (unfortunately, our school has a history of non-involvement). They left very satisfied after being assailed by shouts of "Viva" and "Phantsi" from 32 teachers on strike.

Wednesday, 26 May

7.30 am: Can I borrow your umbrella, com? My placard now says "T..CHER ON ...KE".

8.00 am: I heard that the matrics are about to write the exams! Comrades, we sent a delegation and two letters to the office requesting a postponement of this exam - there's nothing else we can do.

Ask the students if they're prepared!

The students are asked (later, the word "asked" will be replaced by "intimidated" by non-striking teachers) and the exams are

subsequently rescheduled "until conditions are conducive".

9.00 am: Comrades, we've been told that striking teachers should occupy the staffroom, but as there are a few non-striking teachers here (shouldn't they be in their classrooms?!), I think we should move. General agreement from striking teachers and, unbelievably, discussion from non-striking teachers saying, "we have a democratic right to hear what 'you people' are discussing". It's sad to see how the word "democracy" has been prostituted.

We move.

Comrades, our strike has to be made more visible. There are still some comrades who stand in the doorways of their classrooms and claim to be on strike. We need to be disciplined and understand what the term "strike" means, comrades. I feel that we should station two comrades at the front gates to ensure visibility and I would also like to make a proposal that we visit our neighbouring schools to offer support (also to avoid another visit like the day before). We need two volunteers for the zonal meeting at 10.00 am.

10.00 am: Delegates to the zonal meeting are escorted by placard-bearing striking teachers (visibility remember?). One car returns 5 minutes later - we forgot the two comrades at the front gate.

After seeing the delegations safely to their destination, we drive on to three more schools, stand with our placards in the car parks and are met or invited into staffrooms by other comrades-on-strike. At one school,

the striking teachers met us outside and we sang "We shall overcome" - I felt like a missionary!

Thursday, 27 May

11.00 am: Athlone Civic Centre: mass meeting for all Sadtu members.

11.30 am: 9 000 teachers turn up, the meeting is moved to the Athlone soccer stadium. There are comments like, "Waar's die bodies" (a local soccer team) and "Sadtu - 100 points, HoR has yet to score".

Friday, 28 May

7.30 am: Isn't it 8.00 am yet?

8.00 am: We've been practicing the songs we learnt at the mass meeting the previous day. The favourites are "Senzenina" and "Sadtu ..." (the rest of the song is in Xhosa, so we hum - our school has German on its curriculum).

We also enjoy "Phantsi-ing" everything not connected to the

strike - it's become a site swear-word since. (Where's your register Mr X? Reply: "Phantsi register, phantsi).)

11.00 am: We've just heard that the entire zonal meeting is on its way to our school! They still don't believe that we're on strike and they heard rumours that we wrote an exam on Wednesday!

12.00: Over 100 teachers from neighbouring schools are now satisfied that we are definitely on strike.

Monday, 31 May

Teachers stay at home, making the most of the last Republic Day for South Africa.

Tuesday, 1 June

Muslim-striking-teacher-comrades (a neologism) stay at home to celebrate Eid. I was celebrating.

Monday, 2 June

9.00 am: March to Mitchell's Plain Regional offices to force the inspectorate to publicly reject and distance themselves from rationalisation.

11.00 am: Teachers vow to return within two days if our demand is not met.

12 noon: Delegation needed to attend zonal meeting to re-assess the strike.

Thursday, 3 June

7.30 am: Comrades, the strike has been suspended, pending negotiations.

8.00 am: Good morning class. Let's discuss the nature of love in Wuthering Heights.

(PS Anybody need a Girl Friday with six years' teaching experience?)