

PROGRESSIVE student organisation in the Eastern Cape is stronger than ever.

Saspu National spoke to leaders of the Eastern Cape Students Council (Ecasco) — the co-ordinating body for local student congresses and councils in different townships in the region.

They said democratic structures and programmes in black schools are even more advanced than before the State of Emergency.

Since that time, local student organisations have been mushrooming in places like Cradock, PE, Grahamstown, Graaff Reinet, Alicedale, Port Alfred, Addo, Dispatch, Uitenhage, Kirkwood, Middelburg, Hofmeyr, Alexandria, Somerset East, Cookhouse, Adelaide, Bedford, Richmond, Colesburg, Hanover, Noupoort, De Aar, Jansenville and Steytlerville.

Most areas have democratic SRC's affiliated to the local student structure in their areas. Four delegates from each local structure sit on the Ecasco council. There are already 29 branches and others are still developing.

But, building organisation has been a long hard process.

Last year most areas had periodic or total school boycotts for large parts of the year and students didn't write exams.

Entire communities were under attack. Student and other residents were arrested, detained or killed.

How did organisations keep in touch with students when they weren't in school? They organised meetings, social events and distributed pamphlets.

Meetings were banned. So people had to meet in secret and in small groups.

Police and SADF victims' funerals became platforms for communication. It was here that newly formed student organisations were popularised after the banning of Cosas.

Cosas enjoyed widespread support and many areas had Cosas branches. The ban angered students, but it in no way deterred them. New committees and organisations sprang up almost immediately.

'Unban Cosas' graffiti appeared throughout the townships. PE students, parents and teachers demonstrated outside the DET offices demanding that Cosas be unbanned. Thousands flocked there with placards, chanting slogans and singing freedom songs.

A delegation was to present the demands to the DET. But before this could happen, police disrupted the demonstration. Many people were detained.

In line with the national education conference resolutions in December, students went back to classes on January 28 this year.

"By going back to school, students were in a more powerful position to



Eastern Cape students set out their demands

Ecasco in control in East Cape schools

organise and force the government to attend to their demands. It also meant the new student structures were more directly in touch with students again", said Ecasco.

They immediately started setting up SRC's, using the democratic SRC constitution drawn up by parents. Schools all over were alive with discussions on SRC's.

Most principals cooperated. Ecasco held workshops and emphasised the importance of discussing the constitution and SRC's.

"It was seen as the duty of every progressive student activist to thoroughly discuss and explain SRC's to all students in their schools", they said.

Interim committees were set up in the schools to implement the SRC's. After this, SRC elections started in every school.

Each class in a school elected two representatives. Secret ballots were suggested. People didn't want the SRC to be prefects in another form.

Ecasco said the student representatives should be politically aware. "Students elected were those who proved their worth in past struggles. They are people who students have confidence in, who have a good political understanding, people who are able to provide

progressive leadership and direction".

The class elections in a school were usually held on one day, during school hours. Students just informed the principal about the elections — they weren't asking for permission.

An executive of eight people, is elected from among all the class representatives in the school. This includes chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary, treasurer and additional members.

Other class reps go into subcommittees, eg. entertainment, cultural, sport etc. And it is the task of each class rep to represent the students in their class. Every two weeks all the class reps meet in the general council.

Some SRC's have even been given their own offices in the school like in Cradock, PE, Graaff Reinet. Others are striving for this local demand at their schools. They are also demanding that students have free access to school libraries.

If there is a decision to be communicated to every student, then it is discussed in the SRC executive, then in the general council — where there are two reps from each class — and from there it goes to every student in the classes.



SRC's in one township are affiliated to and coordinated in the local student organisation. For example, in PE, students are members of the SRC and members of the PE Students Congress (Pesco).

Through their delegates on the Ecasco council, all the local student structures in the Eastern Cape elect the Ecasco executive and decide on regional activities. Ecasco holds regular workshops for all its branches.

So a call from Ecasco can be communicated directly through these structures, without having to rely on mass meetings or media.

In February and March students were still angry that their demands

weren't being met. SADF and SAP still occupied many townships, there wasn't adequate and free stationary and many students were still in detention.

Some people wanted to boycott. But activists wanted to avoid a total or spontaneous boycott.

The idea came up to have a three day protest to pressurise the DET to bow to students demands.

It was discussed in Ecasco, then in the local student organisations, the general councils of SRC's in an area and finally in the classes.

On 11,12,13 March students throughout the Eastern Cape took over their schools. They held alternative education programmes. Discussions were held on topics like 'the role of students in the national democratic struggle', People's Education, the People's Education Charter Campaign, SRC's, the Freedom Charter, especially the clause 'the doors of learning and culture shall be opened'.

Students did short plays and read poetry in the schools.

Mostly the police and the DET didn't interfere. But in Fort Beaufort the riot squad beat up students and the DET closed five schools at Thubalethu and Lawson.

The Education Charter Campaign (EdCC) and the formation of democratic Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTSA's) in all areas will be a major part of the programme of action this year.

An Ecasco regional council resolved that Education Charter subcommittees be formed in each area. Each SRC should have an EdCC subcommittee. These are to link up to form the EdCC subcommittee of the local student organisation.

Once formed, they would try to popularise the Education Charter through workshops. After that the EdCC subcommittees would meet with other progressive organisations to form joint EdCC area committees.

While most areas now have democratic SRC's, there are still problems in setting up PTSA's. Many areas don't yet have these structures. Students say some parents and teachers are still conservative, especially those teachers which are still part of Atasa.

The school fees boycott is effective in every area. The government tried to trick people into paying. They spoke about school funds instead of school fees. But during the three day protest in March students clarified that they are the same thing.

Eastern Cape students responded to Ecasco calls to highlight the disappearance of Cosas leader Siphiwe Mtimkulu and to observe 21 March as a day of mourning and remembrance.

The government still hasn't rebuilt damaged schools. "It seems that they are adopting a wait and see stand. They want to see what happens after March," said Ecasco.

Mdantsane students not intimidated

THE CISKEI government has virtually declared war on progressive student organisation in Mdantsane, the massive commuter township near East London.

Members and activists of the Mdantsane Students Council (Mdasco) face constant security police harassment.

Last month a Ciskei government minister banned student meetings in schools. And he warned that the government would use its "rawest might" to crush student protests.

But Mdantsane students refuse to be intimidated.

"The Ciskei government's repressive actions show us they are not interested in solving the education crisis. Instead they are harassing students, adding insult to injury", said a Mdasco spokesperson.

Mdasco strongly condemned Ciskei police who dressed up in school uniforms and pretended to be students.

Formed in August last year, Mdasco's task is to activate and

unite students and coordinate student action in Mdantsane.

Despite intense repression, working committees have been set up in all 14 high schools in the township. Students have crushed the prefect system and are now forming democratic SRC's. The SRC's will have a representative from each class and will take over from the working committees.

Two representatives from each working committee and from primary schools sit on the Mdasco student council. A nine person executive and subcommittees — fundraising, publications, womens and disciplinary — are formed from the council.

Last year students put forward their demands to Ciskei Education and 'Injustice' Departments through the Mdantsane Ministers Fraternal. "But they used delaying tactics and refused to meet our demands. We decided to call a total boycott till the end of 1985 as our

demands were not met".

After boycotting classes since August last year, students returned to classes on 28 January.

"We saw the need to reorganise and rededicate ourselves. We decided the battlefield should be in the school premises. So we went back pushing our demands, not forgetting the end of March ultimatum to Botha", said Mdasco executive members.

They said the national education conference demands were also their demands. "Troops in the township affect us — our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers are victims of this".

So this year students returned to classes demanding:

- Free and adequate textbooks and stationary
- Abolition of school fees. Some primary school students were sjambokked and expelled because they said 'Asinamali', they had no money to pay school fees.

● The abolition of prefects must be publicly announced.

● Corporal punishment must be totally eradicated — primary school students are still being beaten.

● Expelled teachers must be reinstated.

● Adequate library, laboratory and other facilities at all schools. Mdasco said Ciskei bought their police luxury cars instead of paying for adequate facilities.

● Unrepresentative school committees must be abolished.

● Harassment and repression of students must stop immediately. Students are being hunted and their homes raided by Ciskei security police. School principals have been told to report on student activities.

One Mdasco organiser is living in fear for his life. Now Ciskei security have accused him of being an instigator. And last year his close colleague was allegedly killed by police.

Mdasco has condemned a state-

ment by Ciskei Education Minister Hobson Nabe which said instigators of school boycotts in Mdantsane were based in Lusaka and Duncan Village.

They said the Ciskei government was the instigator because they refused to listen to student grievances.

"We believe education doesn't only affect students but all sections of the community, so education must be under democratic community control" Mdasco said.

Along with other progressive organisations they plan to implement alternative education programmes for students and work towards developing democratic PTSA's.

Teachers and students are being organised. So one priority is to set up parents committees.

Mdasco sees these as important steps in taking control of the schools and working towards a people's education.