

Nusas 1966 -1986: an Introduction

Nusas (the National Union of South African Students) was founded in 1924 at Grey College in Bloemfontein by Leo Marquard, who believed that a national union of students based on common student interests could unite SA students. It was modelled on the National Union of Students in England.

Initially all English and Afrikaans campuses were affiliated to it, but the diverse cultural divisions in South African society caused a rift of student opinion in the organisation. This was exacerbated during the War, and resulted in Nusas placing more emphasis on black students, when eventually Fort Hare University became affiliated to it in 1945 (and the Black section of the University of Natal in 1957.)

The history of Nusas is a well documented record of striving for a democratic and just society in South Africa: a belief in the concept of academic freedom, non racialism and an opposition to all forms of discrimination, while suffering the repressive measures of the Apartheid Government and their ruthless and relentless attempts to cause its downfall, which never succeeded

1960's

This decade was known as the "Protest Era" as many protest campaigns were organised during this period.

In the 60's Nusas enjoyed a groundswell of student support on campus. In 1966 the President of Nusas, Ian Robertson, was banned after extending an invitation to Senator Robert Kennedy to address the students on the National Day of Affirmation and Academic Freedom, which caused an international outcry. In 1967 Nusas President elect, John Sprack, was stripped of South African citizenship and deported and Dr Raymond Hoffenberg, Chair of the Nusas Advisory Panel, was banned. Other massive protests were organised which included the famous one when a black academic was initially granted, then refused, a teaching post at UCT.(the Majefe Affair).as well as protests organised to mark the 10th Anniversary of 1959 Segregation Legislation

The problem with Nusas was that it represented the white minority, and not the black majority, and despite many years of active protest, in 1968 Steve Biko and Barney Pityana led the black students out of Nusas to form SASO (South African Students Organisation).

1970's

Nusas experienced substantial changes in the early 70's, which included an extensive reassessment exercise, but these never evolved into a defined role for

the organisation. In 1970 it added 3 subsidiary bodies to its structure which aimed to involve students more effectively in the student body, each with its own executive head and budget: Nuswel focussed on Welfare; Nused on Education and Aquarius on cultural matters.

In 1971 the first Wages Commission was established in Durban, while more were to follow in other centres. These played an important role in the formative years of the working class organisation, but it proved difficult for students to effect change, as they were often regarded with suspicion by the working class.

Large scale Republic Day protests were organised in 1971 and in 1972 The Free Education Campaign marked this year.

The inadequacies of Nusas were compounded by the launching of an all out attack by the Apartheid State, the Schibusch Commission of Enquiry into Certain Organisations. Although several other organisations formed part of this investigation, Nusas was their main target. This Commission culminated in a damning 641p report on Nusas in 1973. It was followed by the banning of 8 of its leaders and the declaration that it was an affected organisation, which cut off a great deal of its international funding.

1976 was a watershed year for the political history of the country, with the Soweto Uprising, but Nusas had entered a short crisis period facing waning support and growing opposition on campus and was effectively paralysed at this time. In the middle of this year the Nusas Executive resigned under pressure from the SRC's, and was replaced by an Interim Management Committee. This year also saw the revision of the Nusas Constitution.

When Fink Haysom took over as president in 1977 he tried to resurrect the organization. He presided over a period of consolidation for Nusas, and laid a solid foundation for future development.

Although Nusas was still perceived as having a "heavy" image on the campuses at the end of the 70's, it had not succeeded in recreating the student militancy of the earlier period. A conscious attempt was made to move away from Protest Politics and to get students to consider how they could contribute to a process of change in the country. From the late 70's the Freedom Charter became a key mobilising document for Nusas, which provided a compelling vision of a non racial democratic SA for white students.

1980's

During this decade Nusas kept abreast of the changing political scenario in South Africa. For the past 10 years political, community, trade union, women and

student organisations had increasingly joined together to form non-racial alliances, committed to building a democratic future in South Africa.

With the formation of the UDF in 1983 and the decision of Nusas to be part of it, enabled them to turn the non racialism of the Freedom Charter from principle into practice. The students were encouraged to utilise their resources to support struggles being waged by other democratic groups. Nusas forged links with black students and began to explore forming a non racial student alliance.

In 1985 Matthew Goniwe was supposed to open the July Festival, but instead it opened with the news of his disappearance. That evening PW Botha declared his first State of Emergency. Nusas was unable to operate nationally when their Congress was banned in 1985.

1986 proved to be a difficult year for Nusas: the repression experienced was more severe than in previous years. They met the ANC in Harare on 30 March, which resulted in a productive interchange of ideas, but in June another State of Emergency was declared. Their July Festival was banned, and many student leaders were detained.

However, the lessons learned from past experience were incorporated into practice. A defining aspect of this decade for Nusas was its ability to play a political role as part of the democratic movement, while still maintaining campus support.

Nusas officially dissolved on 2 July 1991.

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