

MEMORANDUM

SRC PRESIDENTS
SASO LOCAL COMMITTEES
BLACK ORGANISATIONS
OVERSEAS CORRESPONDENTS AND ORGANISATIONS
ADVISORY PANEL
RELEVANT INDIVIDUALS

CONFERENCE 1972

BACKGROUND:

The mood for the 1972 Conference of SASO had been fired by a number of serious incidents that had taken place in the black student ranks. The Black student protests, the numerous victimizations that followed, the walk-outs and the birth of the idea of the FREE UNIVERSITY, together with the expected appearance of Prof. Robert Williams, black brother from the United States to open the SASO conference brought close onto 200 delegates and observers from all over South Africa.

The theme of the conference, "Creativity and Black Development" in itself promised much more practical application and meaningful direction for the organisation and the spread of Black Consciousness and Solidarity throughout the country. SASO could rightfully claim that she had sparked off a new wave of political discussion and thinking when for the first time in many years BLACK people had begun to look at themselves and their direction in a much more positive light. Besides gaining unprecedented respect in the country she had become a viable and authoritative reference point that could represent the black community at international levels.

From the 2nd - 9th July, 1972 the eyes of not just BLACK South Africa but indeed the entire world was focused on Hammanskraal, the seat of the most important occasion in SASO's calendar. Debate and in-put from executive and delegates alike was expected to be high-powered and hard-hitting. The fact that Professor Robert C. Williams, a black lecturer in the "Religion Department of Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York and key member of the Black Caucus of the Union Theological Seminary, New York, was expected set a cracking pace to all that would follow and heightened the interest of South Africa, so much so that on the opening night more than a dozen press reporters from different newspapers were present.

PROFESSOR ROBERT C. WILLIAMS:

Unfortunately, the first blow to the Conference was the refusal by the white government of South Africa to allow Professor Robert C. Williams to come into our country. The Executive Committee of SASO issued a statement to conference to this effect. The statement read as follows:-

"It has been announced and advertised per press and programme that Professor Robert C. Williams, a black lecturer from the Union Theological Seminary, New York was to open this our 3rd General Students' Council.

"Professor Williams accepted our invitation at a very late stage as the original invitee, Professor C.E. Lincoln, also of the Union Theological Seminary could not meet the invitation due to some unforeseen circumstance.

"Professor Williams then went on to make formal application to come to South Africa. In a telephone call from the United States on Thursday 29th June, Professor Williams said that the South African Embassy in the United States had given full assurances that he would be given a visa to come to South Africa. However, a week later, Wednesday 28th June, he received an express letter from Pretoria turning his application down.

"Professor Williams said that he was deeply perturbed for it was his fervent wish to come to our conference. In fact, he had had his bags packed, his flight booked and was expecting to arrive in South Africa last night.

"However both the SASO Executive and Professor Williams are still trying to reverse the decision and have him in the country during the next few weeks.

"In the meantime Professor Williams has sent a recording and written text of his opening address which is expected to reach us tomorrow (3rd July) here at conference.

"Professor Williams has also sent a personal message which reads:-

"I send you greetings from the BLACK people in the United States and wish your conference success. I can assure you that Black people in America are watching with pride and interest the work of our black brothers in South Africa. I know that you of SASO will grow from strength to strength and that you will know in your hearts that the BLACK hand of togetherness reaches across all geographical barriers.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE!! "

The statement to the conference concluded with a pointer to the fact that the refusal of visas to people coming to the SASO conference, especially those BLACK brothers from other African countries, seems to be following a pattern and that the "racist powers" are going out of their way to muffle the voice of SASO on the international platform.

OPENING ADDRESS:

With no opening speaker the Executive Committee called upon the then President, Mr. Temba Sono to deliver his Presidential Address as the opening address. What the entire conference expected from the address was an unflinching, unapologetic address that would place SASO in perspective and give some insight into SASO's future, and her role in society. In her three years of existence SASO had moved from strength to strength; she had progressed; she had stood firm. Now we had to move further forward; make further progress.

And the Presidential Address was expected to do this. The chief executive officer of SASO was the most likely candidate to give SASO the direction she so urgently needed. Urgently because of the turbulent year she had experienced. A million burning questions echoed in the minds and hearts of the 200 or more delegates and observers. The Free University, the relationship between student and worker, the impact of BLACK Consciousness, SASO's future on and off the campus, new methods of Conscientization, a complete new look at the role of the BLACK student, the need for a BLACK press, on and on students were probing, wanting to know.

And then Mr. Temba Sono dropped the bombshell. Without any consultation with the executive committee he delivered a paper that left the council shocked, dismayed and angry. Mr. Sono, after the progress, the sacrifices, the boldness with which SASO attacked the problem of white racism and its various manifestations, began to back pedal - began to preach political expediency.

The carefully designed address which quoted Aimé Cesaire & Elridge Cleaver at length and yet began to reject the whole concept of BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS; began to reject the SASO Constitution in fact, gave the whole lie to Mr. Sono's stand.

It became abundantly clear that the address was designed for a purpose; designed to sell Mr. Sono's lie as SASO's new stand. The press would avidly claim that SASO, and not Mr. Sono, had decided to "talk to our enemies", "Move away from the aloof attitude of regarding Bantustans and other separate development bodies in negative light".

Mr. Sono attempted to get SASO "to coalesce our efforts and coagulate our plans even with our detractors". These utterances were unbelievable coming from the SASO president. At a time when we needed to continue our offensive and entrench our philosophy here was someone throwing the whole basis for our existence down the drain and what was more frightening was the fact that the world was listening. The press gallery was avidly taking notes preparing to sound the new bell that SASO was ringing.

Mr. Sono went on to say that SASO must "seek out people who differ with us and we have to try to convert them to our way of thinking This includes everybody - black and white whether they are security police, liberals, non-whites, etc.". This was the final nail in the coffin to Mr. Sono's deposition. This apparent apologetic and "sell-out" stand by Mr. Sono smacked of unsavoury and suspect standards. In the light of the circumstances under which these statements were made the Council was forced to dissociate itself from the sentiments of the President's opening address, and on the same evening of the Presidential address the following resolution was unanimously passed:-

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That this GSC WHILE UPHOLDING the fact that SASO upholds the right of free speech as inalienable;

NEVERTHELESS NOTING THAT:-

1. The speech that has just been delivered by the President, Mr. Sono is in parts contradictory to either SASO policy or the spirit of that policy;
2. great publicity is likely to be given to the speech;
3. only damage to SASO's name can result from such a move;

THEREFORE

wishes to completely dissociate itself from the President's address and only view it as his personal opinion which does not find any real favour with the Council.

This resolution was carried unanimously and during his motivation the mover called upon the President to withdraw his address. The mover also pointed out that it appeared as if the President had deliberately made this "address" to create an impression in the eyes of the public that SASO was shifting its stance. The President refused to withdraw his address and said that he stood by all that he had said.

When the first session closed that evening there was an uneasy and tense atmosphere prevailing. Suspicion about the President's double stand left an ugly taste in the mouths of delegates and observers. The executive committee could not see itself functioning with a man who had made such dubious utterances especially in view of the fact that he was the chief executive officer of SASO.

With the uneasiness and doubt that prevailed at the conference following the "President's address" another motion was put forward the following morning.

Moved by the Publications Director and seconded by the Secretary-General the motion took note of the "grave controversy" the address had created and the fact that the President's statements made him a "security risk" to the organisation and the Black community at large. The motion called upon the President to recuse himself from the chair after having made public that his address did not represent the views and aspirations of Council. But Council took the matter further and called upon the President to resign as President and member of the Executive Committee and that he leave the conference site forthwith. The motion was carried unanimously.

THE PROCEEDINGS:

With the departure of the President, the atmosphere became relaxed and the determination of Council made all efforts to complete the work she had set herself.

Because of the deposition of the President, the Council saw SASO in the thick of newspaper reports, comments and editorials. Much of the newspaper coverage by the white press by and large misrepresented, misreported and degraded the proceedings of Council. It thus became necessary to issue a strong warning to the press to desist from such biased reporting or be evicted from the conference. Because of the Rand Daily Mail's haughty attitude in this respect she was barred from attending the proceedings.

Council then went on to entrench many of her policies and to extend SASO's horizon of activity. A "Black Workers' Council" would be set up and the Permanent Organiser and a Field Worker were given the task of investigating the effectiveness of such a Council and to call up a National workers' seminar within six months to formally establish the Black Workers' Council.

Council also viewed that education for blacks as presently constituted militated against the creative development of our youth and saw the need for SASO to become more actively involved in the development of youth leadership and creativity. Council agreed that SASO could also establish intergroup activity so that there can be much more viable communication.

Again the issue of the press came up and the commission on publications engineered the resolution that called for an independent BLACK PRESS COMMISSION and a seminar on "The Role of the Black Press in South Africa". It was envisaged that the Commission would examine the possibilities of setting up an independent BLACK press that would serve the needs, goals and aspirations of the Black Community.

To extend and stabilize the field of Literacy work the whole administration was revised to include a Director of Literacy and field officers. The whole motivation was to make more meaningful SASO's involvement in this sphere of her Community Development Projects.

The commission on Education submitted a BLACK STUDENTS' MANIFESTO which succinctly laid true emphasis on the meaning of the Black student and the definition of BLACK Education as Black people should see it.

In the field of International Relations Council clearly enunciated its support for the founding of an All-Africa students' movement and resolved to send positive suggestions in this regard to the all-Africa Conference at Kumwasi, Ghana. Contact with the student movements of Africa, Asia and Latin America was seen as a vital necessity in the establishment of links with the rest of the Black World.

As far as national relations were concerned SASO would adopt a much more severe attitude toward sectional "leaders" and in fact called upon these so-called leaders to withdraw them from the system "in an effort to preserve their own dignity and to demonstrate their allegiance with the struggle of Black people". As far as Black Peoples' Convention was concerned Council concluded that SASO was obliged to support and encourage BPC as BPC was committed to the same ideals and principles as SASO.

Election to the Presidential post was the only seat contested in the Executive Committee. A close and excitingly fought election saw Mr. J.L. Modisane emerge (by a very narrow margin) as president of the South African Students' Organisation. The post of Vice-President and Publications Director - both elected on a yearly basis - were filled unopposed by H.E. Isaacs and Ben J. Langa, respectively. Both the Secretary-General's and the Permanent Organiser's posts were ratified by Council and Mr. B.N. Pityana and Mr. R.H. Nengwekhulu respectively continued to occupy their posts.

It was evident at the end of the proceedings that the 3rd GSC of SASO was committed to a more positive and determined involvement at 'grass-roots' level. In culture, education, national relations and community development the whole emphasis rested on student/community relationships. From the determination to do it was obvious that BLACK students were becoming increasingly involved in the liberatory struggle.

POST SCRIPT:

Mr. Temba Sono's subsequent statements to the white press confirmed and gave weight to the correctness of the move by GSC in acting against Mr. Sono in the way she did.

It became clear that Mr. Sono's interests were personally motivated and in no way had the interests of the organisation at heart. Further, from the defamatory statements made by Mr. Sono consequently, it became obvious that Mr. Sono intended to drag SASO into a mud slinging campaign. But the executive quite rightly refrained from entering into an unsavoury and unnecessary display of childishness.