



Jonty Joffe

Jonty is the present NUSAS President, elected at the end of 1981. He was Projects Officer on the 1978/79 Wits SRC and Seminars Chairperson the following year. After completing his B.A. he was elected NUSAS Research Officer for 1981. In July Jonty became acting-President after President Andrew Borraine's activities were severely restricted by his banning order.

Congress opening address

Friends

I have opened most of the speeches I have given this year by pointing to the fact that I am only the Acting NUSAS President — the democratically-elected NUSAS President, Andrew Borraine, has been banned for 5 years.

I open this speech in an even more precarious position. Not only is Andrew unable to take on his rightful place at Congress — but the two NUSAS Presidents who preceded him, Fink Haysom and Auret van Heerden, are now in detention, under Section 22 and Section 6 respectively.

In many countries in the world, a student organisation would have to look at itself very carefully in the case of 3 consecutive leaders being forcibly removed by the government under which they live. After all, people are only jailed, people are only silenced if they have done wrong.

But South Africa is no ordinary country. In South Africa one does not have to do wrong to be detained without trial, banned for 5 years or be convicted and sentenced under the mass of security legislation.

In fact, quite the opposite is usually true. In the distorted country in which we live, to be banned or detained or sentenced is in many ways a complement, an affirmation of one's commitment to opposing the oppression and exploitation that is apartheid, and working for a democratic and just future.

So with all 3 of our past NUSAS Presidents now directly suffering the consequences of standing up and opposing apartheid we do not enter the 59th NUSAS Congress feeling that we have done wrong. We rather enter this congress with our heads held high, firm in the belief that ours is a just cause and one we will continue to work for, whatever the consequences.

The backdrop to this NUSAS Congress is a particularly dramatic one. South Africa is at the moment living through a period which sees the two opposing forces in our society pitched in battle against one another. On the one hand we have the South African State unleashing an incredible wave of repression — particularly at this stage in terms of detentions — against the Democratic Movement in the country. On the other hand we have the Democratic Movement gaining momentum and continuing to grow in the face of repeated attacks against it.

And I think that at the outset of this Congress, it is important that we briefly look at these two forces and then attempt to situate ourselves, as a constituent part of the Democratic Student Movement, as part of this dynamic.

The history of the Democratic Movement in South Africa goes back a long way — almost to the beginning of this century. But this has not been a smooth-flowing history. It has been a history which has gone through varying phases — at times, such as during the 1950s, reaching peaks of intensity and very seriously challenging the structure of power and control in South Africa. At other times, during the following decades the Democratic Movement has suffered the blow of vicious attacks by the Apartheid government. During the years 1960 to 1964 it has continued to exist only through the utmost dedication of a small group of people and the memories of a people longing to be free.

The decade of the 1970s was a fairly desparate one for South Africans. Whilst the massive strike waves of 1973 and 1974 and the nationwide student uprising of 1976 saw the majority of South Africans beginning to regroup and oppose apartheid on the basis of their united strength, it was only towards the end of the decade that the militancy generated once again began to take on the form of the Democratic Movement.

The past 2 or 3 years, however, have seen the Democratic Movement re-emerging in full swing.

If we look back at the past years, we see the re-emergence of a Broad Democratic Front organizing to oppose Apartheid.

I call this Front Broad for two reasons : firstly, it is broad in that it is composed of a vast range of organizations — trade unions, womens organizations, community groups, youth groups, student organizations and political organizations.

Secondly, it is broad in that it is a non-racial front — which does not call for a reversal of apartheid but rather for a totally non-racial future in South Africa.

I must also emphasize that the Democratic Movement has not emerged in isolation. It has emerged very much on the basis of a history of resistance to oppression and exploitation — and a consistent attempt to absorb and assimilate the lessons of that history.

It would be very wrong if we were to idealize the Democratic Movement for that will do nothing to take it forward. It is rather our duty to recognize both its strengths and its weaknesses. And it undoubtedly has substantial weaknesses. At the moment, whilst organization might be particularly strong in some parts of the country, it is very weak and divided in others.

Whilst some organisations and groupings have the depth of leadership to sustain repeated waves of repression, others definitely do not. And further, whilst some groups have readily assimilated the lessons of a history of opposition in South Africa, other groups continue to repeat mistakes and fall into the same traps as those before them.

The strengths of the Democratic Movement are far more marked, however. By simply looking at the past year, we can see the enormous strides it has made.

In 1971, when the Nationalist Government decided to launch massive celebrations for the 10th anniversary of the Republic of South Africa, very few groups took on the challenge of opposing the celebrations. It was actually only NUSAS (I think to our credit) and the Labour Party that organizationally opposed the celebrations. The events of this year were completely different. Throughout the country, democratic groups united to oppose the celebrations. I hardly need tell people here of the Anti-Republic Day activities. In our own terms, we had mass rallies, marches, protests and, although it is something for which we should not really claim credit, we had "Flag Burnings". (As an interlude : Possibly one of the saddest aspects of the campus activities, in retrospect any how, was the fact that Griffiths Mxenge was stopped by the security police on his way to address a meeting at Rhodes).

In general, the Anti-Republic Day activities illustrated the strength and growth of the Democratic Movement — with even Cliff Saunders and the SABC failing to conceal the extent to which the opposition far overshadowed the activities themselves.

I could continue to list and detail the gains of the Democratic Movement this year, but I probably do

not need to do so. One needs only to open the commercial press (with all its own limitations) any day of the week to see the endless number of strikes, boycotts, student activities and political campaigns.

In terms of this Congress, it is probably important to point to the two most recent activities of the Democratic Movement — as they do possibly serve as the specific backdrop of the moment.

The first activity that I am referring to is the just-completed and enormously successful national campaign to boycott the elections of the South African Indian Council. On the grounds that the Council is simply a dummy institution imposed on the "Indian" community by the Nationalist Government, democrats throughout the country organized the community to boycott the elections. As most people know, the final election poll worked out at about 10 percent of registered voters, which is probably about 2 and a half per cent of all Indians — at a fair guess, few more than the extended families of the candidates actually voted.

(There was a fairly remarkable article in the star on polling day which claimed that "by midday two candidates in the SAIC elections were running neck and neck - both having polled one vote". The article just begged the comment or headline of "One man, one vote")

The second activity of the Democratic Movement which should serve as the backdrop to congress is the mounting opposition to Ciskei Independence.

On December 4th, the day after congress ends, the Ciskei will receive its so-called "Independence" from South Africa and become the fourth "independent" homeland — to form part of the jigsaw puzzle of apartheid.

It is important that we focus on the Ciskei during congress — both because the homelands form the very cornerstone of the migrant labour system on which South African society rests and because the issue has quite clearly been singled out by the Democratic Movement as a central one — especially in terms of the position and harassment of the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) by the Ciskei security police and government (which it is very difficult to tell apart).

Having briefly looked at the Democratic Movement, it is important to look at the counter-force ie. the apartheid state, and particularly how it has responded to this movement.

Looking back at the performance of apartheid over the past year, we see that it has been one of crisis.

- * Despite P W Botha's Total Strategy
- * Despite the Carlton and Cape Town Conferences with big business
- * Despite all attempts to crush opposition
- * Despite the support of the Reagan Administration

Despite all these, and many more factors, the apartheid system is currently faced with crises on all fronts :



Laurie Nathan, UCT SRC President addresses Congress on the opening night.

- * Economically, they have not even begun to come to terms with a high inflation-rate, massive unemployment rate and drastic skills shortage.
- * Politically, both the Fascist Extreme Right-Wing and, far more importantly, the Democratic Movement, have failed to accept the legitimacy of government initiatives.
- * Ideologically, despite all attempts by the SABC and SADF, they have failed to convince the majority of South Africans that although they might dislike apartheid, it is actually good for them.

Although these crises might encourage those working for change in South Africa — because although they are unpleasant to live through they illustrate the inadequacies of the existing system — they have also made the government desperate.

And a desperate power is a particularly dangerous one!

It is within this context that we have witnessed an enormous amount of State repression during the year. We do not need to look beyond our own ranks — in the student movement — to see the extent of this repression.

A few isolated examples of repression of students or those close to us, include :

- * The detention of Andrew for 35 days
- * The banning of Sammy Adelman and Andrew, as well as Firoz and Azhar Cachalia on Wits campus
- * The banning of the Republic Day Rally on Rhodes campus
- * The trial of 48 UCT students under the Riotous Assemblies Act
- * The detention of Clive van Heerden and Keith Coleman, the editors of SASPU National, just over a month ago.

The list is endless....and at the same time only a minute proportion of the number of acts of repression against the trade union movement, community groups and Democratic Movement as a whole.

(By last week, the government announced that it now had 111 detainees. Whilst the SAIRR estimated the figure at being far greater, since then at least 20 more people have been detained, and, as far as I am aware, none released).

We must now ask the question of how NUSAS fits into all of this?

The years 1977 to 1979 were very important years for NUSAS. After the severe crisis the organization faced in 1976, 3 themes were launched with the intention of consolidating the organization, building structures on the campuses and developing a new generation of leadership. These 3 themes, "Africanization"; "Education for an African Future" and "Action on Education" provided us with an exceptionally solid foundation from which to launch into the 1980s.

At the end of 1979 the NUSAS President, Auret van Heerden (and I believe I can quote a detained person) claimed that it was now important for NUSAS to "look outward" and begin to once again participate in the broad political arena. The transition from being an introverted to an extroverted political force is one which I believe NUSAS has undergone particularly well.

During the last two years NUSAS has played an important role in the Democratic Movement in various ways.

Firstly, we have participated in national campaigns, such as the "Free Mandela Campaign" and the "Anti-Republic Day Celebrations" campaign.

Secondly, we have played a support role to other democratic organizations, most significantly in the Fattis and Monis, Meat and Wilson Rowntree boycotts and the support of the squatters at Nyanga Bush and at Kliptown.

Thirdly, we have begun to form part of a non-racial student movement in South Africa. I think that it is

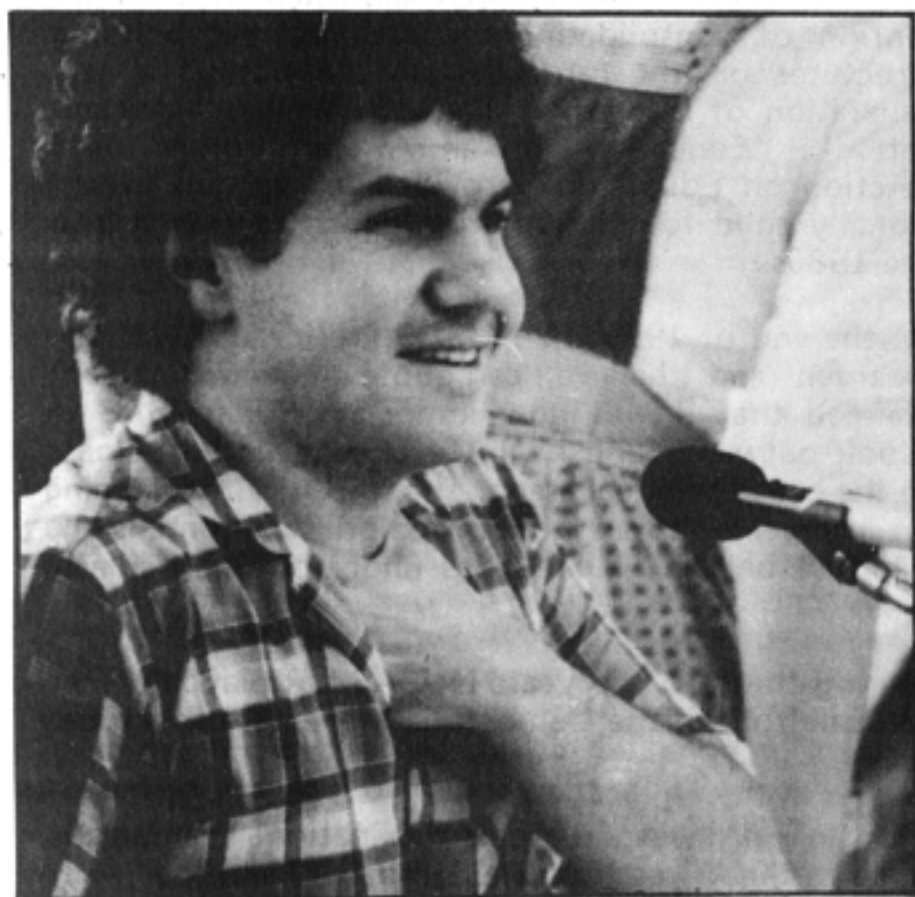
important that I clarify what I am saying here. Over the past year or two, our relationship with other Democratic student groups, such as AZASO and COSAS, has increased markedly. However, this does not mean that we have any intention of synthesizing the organizations. The vastly different conditions on Black and White campuses necessitate that Black and White student groupings organize separately. But this does not mean that there is not opportunity for significant room for co-operation and for forming an alliance with one another over common issues. It is in terms of this alliance that I believe great gains have been made.

At the same time as participating and contributing to the Democratic Movement, NUSAS has also developed considerably on the campuses themselves. I would argue that we are at one of the strongest points in our 57-year history. Not only are 4 out of the 5 "English" campuses affiliated to NUSAS, but students have elected strongly pro-NUSAS SRCs on each of these.

But our strengths must not make us complacent. It is crucial that we now consolidate the gains we have made to ensure that we continue to go forward.

There are a few significant problem areas that we are faced with and, at the outset of this congress, I would like to point to a few of these :

Firstly, whilst we have participated in campaigns and picked up many issues, we have often failed to pay adequate attention to organization and education on the campuses themselves. We have mobilized our support base, but we have not really organized it.



Although we have great support, not enough people are participating in organization and developing the understanding that will ensure that their commitment to democracy will be a life-long one.

A second problem area arises with our relationships with other groups. We have built very productive relationships with the progressive groups — be they Black students, trade unions or support committees.

These relationships are, however, very complex and sensitive and we need to assess them very carefully so as to ensure their durability and continued productivity.

Thirdly, I feel that we have not emerged as a powerful enough force in the running of our universities. With last year's theme we focussed on the Anti-democratic aspects of all areas of society, except our own environment — the university campuses themselves.

There are currently many moves being made in terms of the South African universities, including the attempt by the SADF to establish military units on all campuses and the various commissions, recommendations and reports of the "liberal establishment" and the South African State. It is imperative that we develop a systematic response to these areas and advance the demands of democratic students in terms of these issues.

NUSAS Congress provides us with a unique opportunity to get together and share ideas. We have 6 days in which to assess our achievements over the past year and plan and prepare for the future.

NUSAS Congress can be a lot of fun, but it is also a serious affair. We live in a very serious country and have taken on a very serious task — that of working for change. We must have our fun and get to know each other, but the reality of the country in which we live should always be kept in mind.

There is something about this congress hall that looks very familiar. I suppose its got to do with the similarity with the 1978 congress held here in Cape Town. But there is also something very different. Personally, that difference is symbolized by a comparison which I can't help making with 1978.

In 1978, the NUSAS President, Auret van Heerden, on the evening of the 28th November, presented his brother Clive with a 21st birthday present - a book on Black jazz — in front of the whole congress. Those who know Clive can probably imagine his embarrassment at the situation.

Well, it is now 3 years later and it is once again the 28th November. Both Auret and Clive are sitting in prison cells, under Section 6, in solitary confinement.

Clive and Auret are only 2 amongst a whole host of detainees, 15 of which are today only experiencing their second day of incarceration.

For many of us who know people in detention, and for whom they are not just names, but possibly friends, lovers, associates or acquaintances, this is a difficult time. But, although it is a difficult time, that should in no way be allowed to deter our efforts and our activities.

The past few years have been relatively comfortable one's, particularly for white democrats in South Africa. If we are to read what is happening around us, we see that things are changing and we can predict that from now on we won't be having quite as comfortable a ride.



Joe Phaahla, AZASO President and Jonty Joffe, NUSAS President.

In the face of the existing attack on the democratic movement, it is important that we carefully consider our position and work at how we are not only going to continue, but how we are going to continue to grow. In ending this talk, in terms of the conditions under which this congress is taking place, I would like to make a few suggestions as to how we should respond to the brutality of apartheid and, particularly the current wave of detentions :

Firstly, we must not be intimidated.

One of the main aims of waves of repression is to intimidate and scare those who are not actually detained. We cannot afford to be intimidated. In fact, in the face of detentions, it becomes vital that we not only continue, but actually intensify our efforts. Although we acknowledge the power of the Nationalist government, we do not acknowledge it so as to withdraw. We rather acknowledge it so as to understand and anticipate it better — so that we can continue to work productively.

Secondly, it is important that we never allow ourselves to become complacent. With enormous numbers of people detained each year, there is a tendency for people to begin to ignore the repression and accept it as part and parcel of everyday life. That is something we must never allow ourselves to do. With each passing day, detentions become more, not less of an issue, and it is our responsibility to utilize every resource we have available to keep the issue in the public eye and ensure that people are educated about

the horrors of the society in which we live.

Thirdly, we must carefully look at ourselves in the face of detentions. We must consider our own positions and our own commitment and begin to accept that if we plan to dedicate ourselves to a democratic future in our country, the road will not necessarily be an easy one.

But, if it is one in which we believe, then it is a challenge that we must accept and commit ourselves to for the rest of our lives.

This NUSAS Congress provides us with a unique opportunity. Whilst the broader community from which we come is under attack, in the form of an endless list of detentions, we have the opportunity not only to continue with our work, but to show the world that we are continuing.

It is within this context that I would like to send out a very clear message from this congress. It is a message which goes out to the rulers of this country:

- to P W Botha
- to Magnus Malan
- to Major Williamson

The message is that "for each one of us who you detain and for each one of us you take away, there are 10, 20 or 100 of us waiting right here to take their place."