



# Joe Phaahla

Joe is the President of the Azanian Students' Organisation (AZASO), a national black students organisation which has committed itself to "a non-racial democratic society free of exploitation". Apart from being a national student leader, Joe has played a strong leadership role in different areas on his own campus, Durban Medical School. He was the 1980/81 head of his residence house committee and a member of the SRC.

## The student movement in the struggle for democracy

### I. GENERAL ANALYSIS

Broadly speaking, the struggle in our country is between those who enjoy the wealth of the country and those who work to produce this wealth but do not enjoy it. This is not very much different from other struggles which have been waged in many other parts of the world. What causes the superficial differences between struggles waged in different parts of the world is the nature of means used to maintain the unequal distribution of wealth. The means used are for example, the political system. While Mozambicans struggled against colonialism, we are struggling against apartheid.

While we have the two main camps in conflict viz. the haves and the have nots, there is also a significant group of people who stand in the middle. These are the people who can fall either on the side of those who own the wealth or those who are deprived. In the South African situation those who control the wealth are a white minority supported by a privileged white community. In order to strengthen its position, the group which controls the economic and political system also co-opts a few blacks by giving them privileges denied to the majority of the black people. The division is further enhanced by providing privileges based on the criteria of racial classification. Together with small businessmen whose aspiration is accumulation of wealth, black intellectuals serve as a pool from which supporters of the status quo are promoted through granting of privileges to live a better life than the rest of their people.

The struggle for justice, democracy and a fair distribution of wealth throughout the world has shown that:

1. The conflict is primarily between those who control and enjoy the wealth and those who produce the wealth but don't enjoy it.
2. That the privileged middle of the road group is torn apart with a few supporting the exploited and the majority supporting the exploiters.
3. That in situations where racism is used to further divide the people:
  - i) Even the privileged from the dominated group will support the struggle in large numbers except for a few who get completely assimilated into the status quo.
  - ii) That the majority from this privileged group are only against the system in as far as it prevents them from getting more privileges and only a few want to see a complete change of the status quo.

The role played by intellectuals in the struggle can be very crucial to the outcome of the conflict. If the arena of struggle is dominated by those who only oppose those aspects of the system which prevents them from ascending, then what emerges is a compromise with those who own and control the wealth. On the other hand if the struggle is spearheaded by those who seek to create a democratic order the result is a social order free of inequalities.

### II. THE S.A. CONTEXT

The South African situation is one in which racialism is used as a tool to divide those who do not own and control the wealth of the country. All people classified as "white" have political and economic privileges. This strategy ensures that a large majority of whites support the status quo. Black people have no political rights at all and to further sub-

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divide them, economic privilege again based on race is used as a tool. As noted in the general discussion, economic privileges are further granted to a few among the already divided politically deprived black majority in order to make them more easily controllable.

## STUDENTS' POSITION

### A. WHITE STUDENTS

White students are born into the privileged group in the South African conflict. Their upbringing and education is geared towards shaping them for positions within the already privileged community. However the fact that they are still in a preparatory stage for roles they are expected to play in the ongoing conflict affords them an opportunity to make a choice. Ultimately, after processing they will fall into 3 groups: 1) the group which will support and strive to maintain the status quo; 2) the group that will call for liberalisation of the status quo without questioning its fundamental structures; 3) the group that will throw its lot behind the large majority of deprived black people in seeking to eradicate inequality from its roots.

### B. BLACK STUDENTS

Black students are generally speaking part and parcel of the oppressed black majority in the country. It is however out of this group that those in power create allies to help control the voteless and exploited black majority. As a group, black students can either simply strive to eradicate the barriers which prevent them from climbing the ladder of social division or alternatively they can throw their lot behind the efforts of the large majority of exploited black workers to eradicate inequality in all respects. The fact about the alternative roles which black students can play is well illustrated by the history of the involvement of black intellectuals and students in the South African struggle. At some stages, eg. the beginning of the A.N.C. Youth League and later in the sixties in SASO, black students challenged political deprivation without much attention to economic deprivation. However on both occasions later, i.e., in the fifties in the case of post-Youth League and eighties in the case of post-SASO, black students faced the reality of the situation and threw their energy behind the black exploited workers. In the case of the eighties it was after the traumatic experiences of the 1976 uprising that black students came to appreciate more clearly the need for solidarity in action under the leadership of the workers. The past few years has shown very clearly that black and white intellectuals can use the privileges open to them to further the workers' struggle.

## MORE RECENT LESSONS TO THE STUDENT MOVEMENT AND THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

### 1980 SCHOOL BOYCOTTS

The 1980 school boycotts left no doubt about the fact: black students have learnt a lot out of the 1976 popular uprisings. Whereas the 1976 boycotts were

more of spontaneous mass protests, the 1980 boycotts were more organised conscious mass actions. There was more conscious organisation and the issues at stake were more clearly outlined than was the case in 1976. The need to change the entire political and economic system in order to establish a democratic order was more clearly expressed than was the case in 1976. Closer links between students and parents who constitute the bulk of the work force were forged in the struggle itself through consultation than through coercion. Very conspicuous in the 1980 boycotts was the involvement of white students here and there. There were however also mistakes made in 1980 in many areas from which we need to learn, eg. the prolongation of the boycotts leading to disunity in the ranks of the black students themselves.

### 1981

1981 saw the strengthening of the direction already taken in 1980. Students came to play a positive complementary role in the workers' struggles of 1981, eg. Wilson-Rowntree, Leyland etc. The nationwide rejection of the Republic Day celebrations witnessed forging of closer links in action between black and white democrats.

As we say good-bye to 1981 and we enter 1982 we witness a major onslaught by those in power on the broad democratic front that has emerged in the past few years. The high-handed actions of the state are coupled with attempts to co-opt a more significant number of people from the ranks of the oppressed into their apparatuses. The variety of Commissions appointed by the state, ranging from the De Lange to the Rabie and Steyn Commissions illustrate the above points very clearly.

What is needed now is a clear understanding on the part of those engaged in struggle of the nature of the forces in conflict, the shapes being assumed and the alliances being forged. It is important that the nature of the democratic front should also be clearly understood so that this front can pose an effective challenge to the status quo. It is going to be increasingly more important in the coming times that we understand very clearly the difference between a democratic non-racial alliance and a liberal multiracial jargon. Non-racial alliance involves unity in purpose and action while multiracialism involves unity in diversity of purpose and actions.

In the coming times we will increasingly have to:

1. Strengthen our existing organisations and forge closer links of all democratic organisations.
2. Draw more people into the democratic front including whites who have come to accept the righteousness of our demands.
3. Withstand attempts by those in power to weaken us through the carrot and stick method of co-option coupled with repression.

Long live the democratic front!