

From Revolt to a Search for Alternatives

Resistance to South Africa's education structures has altered since the 1976 revolt. Concrete questions of educational alternatives are now part of the agenda. LINDA CHISHOLM surveys the changing nature of the education struggle.

Schooling on the Witwatersrand and in the Eastern and Western Cape came to a virtual standstill by the end of 1985. By November in Soweto alone, all high schools had been closed. Schools were no longer merely 'contested terrain'; they had become one of the major battlefields of political struggle. Students were sjambokked into schools (Soweto) and off school premises (Cape Town); casspirs occupied school grounds and children as young as seven were detained in mass swoops on townships after the declaration of the state of emergency in June.

More students, parents and teachers than ever before became politicised. While organisations with roots in the post-1976 era were banned - notably the Congress of SA Students (COSAS), founded in 1979 - and members of oppositional groups active on the educational front were driven underground or detained, new tendencies and initiatives emerged in response to the large-scale disruption of the educational process.

The Soweto Parents Crisis Committee (SPCC) was formed in October 1985 in an attempt to give direction to student struggles and restore order in the schools. It was responsible for convening the first national education conference, at Wits University in December, where the explosive student slogan 'Liberation before Education' was replaced with the slogan 'People's Education for People's Power'. At the conference, SPCC members were delegated to form the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC). The NECC organised the second conference in Durban in March. The decision taken at the earlier conference to return to school was ratified with the proviso that a few hours each school day be spent on

people's education.

Teachers have begun to commit themselves more actively to the process of opposition to apartheid. The African Teachers Association of SA (ATASA), hitherto quiescent and moderate in its stance towards 'politicisation' of schooling, has been forced to confront its isolation from the education struggle. HH Dlamlenze, the now-retired ATASA secretary, was instrumental in forging links with the SPCC in late 1985, and the SPCC accepted it as the main representative of teachers. In early 1986 ATASA urged all its members to withdraw from Department of Education and Training (DET) structures; it also supported the May Day stay-away call.

The significance of this shift cannot be underestimated, but it is unclear whether this shift in ATASA's public position represents a fundamental change of attitude among its membership, or to what extent it is leadership rhetoric. ATASA has not, for example, indicated whether it has withdrawn from the South African Council of Education, the multi-racial advisory body to the Minister of Education on general educational policy. The SACE is not strictly speaking a DET structure. In recent years, new and progressive teachers' organisations have mushroomed. They are bitterly opposed to apartheid education in any form, supportive of student demands for a non-racial democratic education in a democratic and united South Africa, and suspicious of older, racially divided and traditionally more conservative teacher associations.

The National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA), formed in 1980, grew steadily on a non-racial basis during 1983 and 1984 in Natal, Orange Free State and Transvaal, and was infused

with more than 3 000 teachers from the Eastern Cape and rural areas of South Africa in 1985. The Eastern Cape Teachers Union (ECTU) and the East London Progressive Teachers Union (ELPTU) are also active progressive teachers' organisations.

The Western Cape Teachers Union (WECTU), consisting of some 2 000 teachers from coloured schools, was formed in November 1985 in Cape Town. In Cape Town's African townships, the Democratic Teachers Union (DETU), also espousing a progressive ideology, was founded, while politicised white teachers united in Education for an Aware South Africa (EDASA).

All these organisations are young, and have not yet co-ordinated their activities nationally. They are still relatively weak, but nonetheless represent a vital new development: their members are predominantly young teachers integrated into wider political struggles. It is on such teachers that 'people's education' and the future transformation of the education system will depend. At present many African students demand that their teachers join such bodies, since they believe only teachers based in these organisations can become the cadres of people's education.

These developments are a direct response to struggles of students and youth, both in schools and in the community, at local and national political levels.

As conflict in the schools intensifies, with children singled out as special targets for state-sanctioned violence (see for example US Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 'The War Against Children: South Africa's Youngest Victims') it has become increasingly difficult for teachers to remain neutral and for parents not to intervene.

Central questions are: why and how schools became one of the main sites of struggle; and why black teenagers became the 'shock troops of a nationwide political insurrection' (City Press, 20 April 1986).

An explanation can be put forward in terms of:

- * intensification of class and national struggles;
- * shifts in the economy and society;
- * the limits and contradictions of state strategy in education.

INTENSIFICATION OF STRUGGLE

The 1970s saw growing militancy on the part of both the black working class and youth. From 1973 onwards, South African industry was rocked by strike waves from workers demanding higher wages and the right to organise. An independent trade union movement emerged, which, although comprising only 3% of African workers by 1979, altered the balance of class power, at least at the point of production.

The student revolt of 1976 against Bantu Education gave birth to a range of popular community organisations and to more developed student organisation in schools. In 1979, a new students organisation, COSAS, was formed to replace the black consciousness student bodies banned by the state in 1977. COSAS departed from previous student politics in that it adopted a non-racial rather than a black consciousness stance, though intense struggles over its position continued.

In February 1980, school boycotts started in the Western Cape, and spread rapidly across the country, involving more than 60 000 students by October. Consolidating the process of radicalisation begun in 1976, new leaders and groups of students emerged to push the educational struggle to a qualitatively different level to that of the past.

Important advances were made in analysis of the roots of inequality in education, and strategic and tactical approaches to combat this; in conceptualisation of alliances with the working class and the community; and in generating a pedagogy which questioned school hierarchies as well as the content and method of education. During this period students developed a critique of capitalism and the role of 'gutter education' in reproducing the working class.

After the state crackdown on the 1980 boycotts, student organisation in schools and on university campuses was more low-key until 1982. Organisation concerned itself with concrete local issues. Students in tertiary institutions began to demand the right to form democratic student representative councils (SRCs) on university campuses, while COSAS was beginning to mobilise high schools, particularly in the Eastern Cape. Issues

involved the limits of compulsory education, a concession introduced in certain areas in 1980; unfair matric results; the prohibition of students over 18 in standard eight and over 20 in standard ten from attending school, a measure imposed after 1976 to curb student activism.

democratic and trade union movements.

After 1983 student focus on issues of power and control over the educational process was expressed in demands such as the national campaign for democratic SRCs in every school, which COSAS launched in early 1984. An end to corporal punishment and sexual



The demand for elected SRCs begins to address the broader question of political power

Since 1983 there have been three main developments in the student movement, which grew rapidly from this period. These shifts dramatically sharpened the form and intensity of national struggle. Students increasingly focused on the question of power, youth congresses emerged and there was a growing alliance between students, youth and the

harassment of pupils was also demanded.

In microcosm, the demand for elected SRCs tackles the issue of self-determination, and begins to address the broader question of political power. The national political context to some extent accounts for this: 1983 saw the formation of the National Forum and the United Democratic Front to oppose the

state's constitutional proposals, which included coloureds and Indians and excluded Africans. Students participated in these national political campaigns as well as their own; their own demands and issues became linked to wider political struggles.

An important development was the emergence of youth congresses. COSAS's organisational base was in high schools. When the DET's age-limits began to exclude significant numbers from schools and hence the possibility of joining COSAS, youth congresses were formed to absorb this constituency. Twenty youth congresses were formed during 1984; since then they have proliferated into a network which today includes even the smallest towns (City Press, 20 April 1986).

As unemployment among youth soared, the base for youth congresses swelled after 1982. These congresses have tended to organise around expressly political issues, rather than specific school, factory or civic questions. Youth congresses have infused a deeper, sometimes more desperate militancy into student and community politics, and they form an important part of the UDF's base.

Recent months have produced evidence of alliances between student, youth, and community organisations, and trade unions. The alliance between students and workers was weak in 1976. By 1980, though limited to the Western Cape, it was firmer. The formation of the UDF and COSATU in 1983 and 1985 respectively, facilitated co-ordinated action between increasing numbers of organised students, communities and trade unions. This was seen in the stay-aways on the Vaal and East Rand in November 1985, and in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage in March 1986 - mass struggles which dramatically shifted the balance of forces to the side of the oppressed.

SHIFTS IN ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

Intensified struggles during the past decade have taken place and helped shape deep structural shifts in the economy and society. These significantly altered the terrain of struggle in education.

The state of emergency, declared in the Transvaal and Eastern Cape in June 1985 and extended to Cape Town in

November, was imposed on townships where the working class carried the increasing burdens of the recession. During 1985, inflation ran at 16%; there were large price increases for basic foods and GST was raised twice. Unemployment, which stood at over one million throughout the 1960s, grew steadily. In 1985, between 1,5 and 3 million Africans were out of work. Unemployment was particularly severe in the Eastern Cape where figures reached over 50% in some areas. A large proportion of these people are young school-leavers.

Combined with acute poverty, conditions in the townships further exacerbated economic distress. Untarred and unlit streets, inadequate water supplies, creche and schooling facilities are common township conditions. Rents are high, and when raised in the context of deepening immiseration, have frequently sparked revolt, as in the Vaal Triangle during 1984. As townships ignited one by one and were occupied by the SA Defence Force in the past year, forms of student and youth activities changed. They are fighting back, arming themselves and commandeering petrol stations and trucks to confront state armed forces.

STATE EDUCATION STRATEGY

Faced with a deepening economic, political and ideological crisis after the mid-1970s, the South African state embarked on a strategy of reform, in fields ranging from labour relations and influx control to housing and education. State education policy since the late 1970s involved a combined and contradictory strategy of reform and repression. While reformist initiatives created space for democratic organisation, the fact that the state was only prepared to contemplate limited reform demanded that its programme be underpinned by repression.

As a result, the initiatives designed to win legitimacy for the state were undermined by repression - repression which significantly widened the base of opposition to apartheid education.

Characteristically, the Cillie Commission of Inquiry to investigate the causes of the 1976 uprising only produced its report four years later. In 1980, the commission published its

findings: it cited lack of political rights, influx control and segregation laws as contributing to the hatred, despair and dissatisfaction which lay at the root of the revolt.

Meanwhile, state response to the education crisis after 1976 involved equal parts of reform and repression. While harassing and detaining students, and despite the banning of 18 black consciousness organisations in 1977, the state lifted the ruling on compulsory teaching of Afrikaans which sparked the uprising. It introduced compulsory schooling into certain areas, introduced age-limits in standards eight and ten. Schemes to upgrade teacher qualifications were initiated, and the Department of Bantu Education was renamed the Department of Education and Training through the Act of that name in 1979. By this time COSAS was beginning to organise around free and compulsory education, age-limits and lack of democracy in schools.

To big business, state tinkering was insufficient to deal with the increasingly urgent shortage of skilled labour. During the brief boom at the beginning of the 1980s, business began to stimulate and encourage investment in black education and training. Its growing role in providing education reflected a tentative reformist alliance with the state. This reformist initiative was most clearly expressed in the HSRC Commission of Inquiry into education under the chairmanship of Professor Jan de Lange, rector of the Rand Afrikaans University, and chairman of the Broederbond.

In 1981 the commission, composed of representatives from business and private sector lobbies, state educational institutions and black and white professional teacher associations, presented its report and recommendations for restructuring the education system. Recommendations tallied with the 'total strategy' then in vogue: they aimed to modernise apartheid by improving urban social conditions in order to drive a wedge between urban and rural blacks, and between middle-class and working-class urban blacks.

Although the commission proposed considerable changes to the existing system of Bantu Education and in fact recommended the introduction of a single Ministry of National Education, it bore the stamp of the interests which helped frame it:

* Recommendations were directed at the urban, skilled working class; none concerned schooling either on white farms (which, in March 1983, comprised 73% of the 7 155 schools in the 'white' areas), or in the bantustans, where 69% of African school-goers are concentrated. Here schooling is theoretically the responsibility of bantustan authorities.

* All recommendations made for urban areas were directed at providing education of equal quality; in other words, equal but still separate education administered by different education departments.

In 1983 a government white paper accepted de Lange's proposal that 'equal opportunities for education, including equal standards...shall be the purposeful endeavour of the State', but rejected the recommendation for a single Ministry of Education. The white paper instead decreed that education would continue to be administered by separate ministries for different races. Education for white, Indian and coloured people would be run as an 'own affair' by ministers from the respective houses in the tricameral parliament. Education for Africans in 'white' South Africa would fall under 'general affairs', and be controlled by a minister in the cabinet of the state president. At regional (or provincial) and local levels, provision of education would also be dealt with as an 'own' affair.

But two years later the government was implementing the earlier, rejected, de Lange Commission recommendation for a single education ministry. The new Department of National Education does not, however, replace separate departments of education. Rather, it determines financial policy, conditions of service and teacher registration, and matters of syllabus, examinations and curriculum for all departments of education. In short, it is intended to equalise separate education. The minister, in turn, is advised by a number of multi-racial bodies, including the South African Council for Education.

Practical state intervention in schooling also remains segregationist. For example, state spending on black education increased significantly after 1976. Between 1978 and 1982 total educational expenditure increased by 74%. During the same period, expenditure on African education in 'white' areas and 'independent' and 'non-independent'

bantustans increased by 130%, while expenditure on white, coloured and Indian education increased by 69%, 64% and 107% respectively.

However, the lion's share of the budget is still allocated to white education. In the 1983-84 financial year, 52,8% of the total education budget was allocated to white education (16% of the pupils enrolled at educational institutions), compared with 29,9% to African education in 'white' areas and the ten 'homelands' (70,1% of pupils), 5,8% to Indian education (3,1% of pupils), and 11,5% to coloured education (10,1% of the total).

Students perceived the state's changes as merely reproducing the inequalities of apartheid. Indeed, the impact of 'reform' on student consciousness was minimal. It was in fact seen as an attempt to deepen control. In this context, the struggle for democracy in schools and in society flourished.

For most students, the reality of state intervention was brutality and repression. Student organisation and protest was constantly met on the ground with dogs, bullets and teargas.

Resistance and repression in schools and colleges follows a typical pattern: a peaceful boycott is met by police intervention and arrests. These in turn cause continuation of the boycott with demands for the release of colleagues. Further police intervention, often involving more arrests and deaths, escalates the conflict. Funerals and rallies to commemorate those who died at the hands of the South African state have further widened opposition.

In the Northern Transvaal, for example, boycotts started in two high schools near Tzaneen where students demanded SRCs. In the course of the boycott, 84 students were arrested. They were jailed and assaulted, and needed medical attention after their release. One student was expelled; so the boycott continued, first with demands for release of those detained, then for reinstatement of the expelled student.

At the same time, for different reasons, police attacked students at the University of the North. A number were detained, and a boycott of classes began, demanding their release. During the boycott, hostels were raided in the early hours of the morning, and next day students were forced to class by baton-wielding police. Students responded by calling on Northern Transvaal high

schools to begin a solidarity boycott. They did so, and police violence continued.

These events took place in September and October 1985, at the height of the state of emergency. During 1985, more than 60% of those in detention were younger than 25. At least 209 children were killed. Hundreds were subjected to torture. Unimaginable mental, psychological and emotional damage has been inflicted on thousands of children. In this context, the slogan 'Liberation Before Education' was articulated.

A TRANSFORMED SOCIETY

The radicalisation of communities, in particular teachers and parents, was precipitated by events like those sketched above. Class and national struggle intensified during the 1970s and 1980s, as the grip of recession and unemployment tightened its hold on townships already poverty-stricken and deprived. State initiatives aimed at increased control, through both reform and bullets. Schools and youth became an important focus of resistance.

Although such resistance varies in intensity, in consciousness and in degree of organisation from region to region, it is a national phenomenon. And it incorporates not only the cities, but also rural areas, including the bantustan areas.

Issues of transformation of society and education have become central. In education the call for the implementation of 'people's education for people's power' demonstrates the political lessons learned over the past few years; it also raises concrete questions about the nature of a transformed education system.

How equipped are teachers formed by the present system to teach people's education? What training is required to enable them to do so? What structure, content and method of education will genuinely serve all the people of South Africa? And finally, how can the democratic participation of students, teachers and parents be ensured in the realisation of a transformed system of education?

These questions form the current agenda in South Africa's ongoing education struggle.