

Tebello Motapanyane, Secretary-General of the South African Students Movement, describes the events and political developments leading to the new upsurge, and explains how the militant youth see the future shape of the political struggle

HOW JUNE 16 DEMO WAS PLANNED

Interview with Tebello Motapanyane,
January 1977.

Q. You were deeply involved in the events which took place in South Africa last year amongst the students. You were particularly active in the Soweto area. Could you tell us what position you held at that time?

A. I was elected as secretary general of the South African Students Movement — SASM — that is at national level at its congress in Roodepoort in March 1976. I was also the first chairman of the Action Committee, later called the Soweto Students' Representative Council. The SSRC actually organised the demonstrations in Soweto which hit the world headlines on June 16.

Q. It is clear from all reports that SASM played the major rôle in initiating the events which began on June 16 in Soweto and were followed by continuous actions, particularly amongst the youth, throughout the country. How was SASM formed?

A. SASM was formed in 1970-71 by high school students. It was mainly concen-

trated at the three high schools in Soweto — Orlando West High, Diepkloof High and, of course, Orlando High.

Q. Were there any organisations already existing amongst the students before SASM was formed which thereafter became merged into SASM?

A. There were others from outside who had organised youth clubs. Many young people used to go to these youth clubs and take part in meetings. These discussions played an important rôle in the subsequent decision by the students to form SASM as a students movement based in the schools. It was first known as ASM, the African Student Movement.

Q. The African Student Movement was restricted to the three high schools that you mentioned. How did it grow into what subsequently became known as SASM?

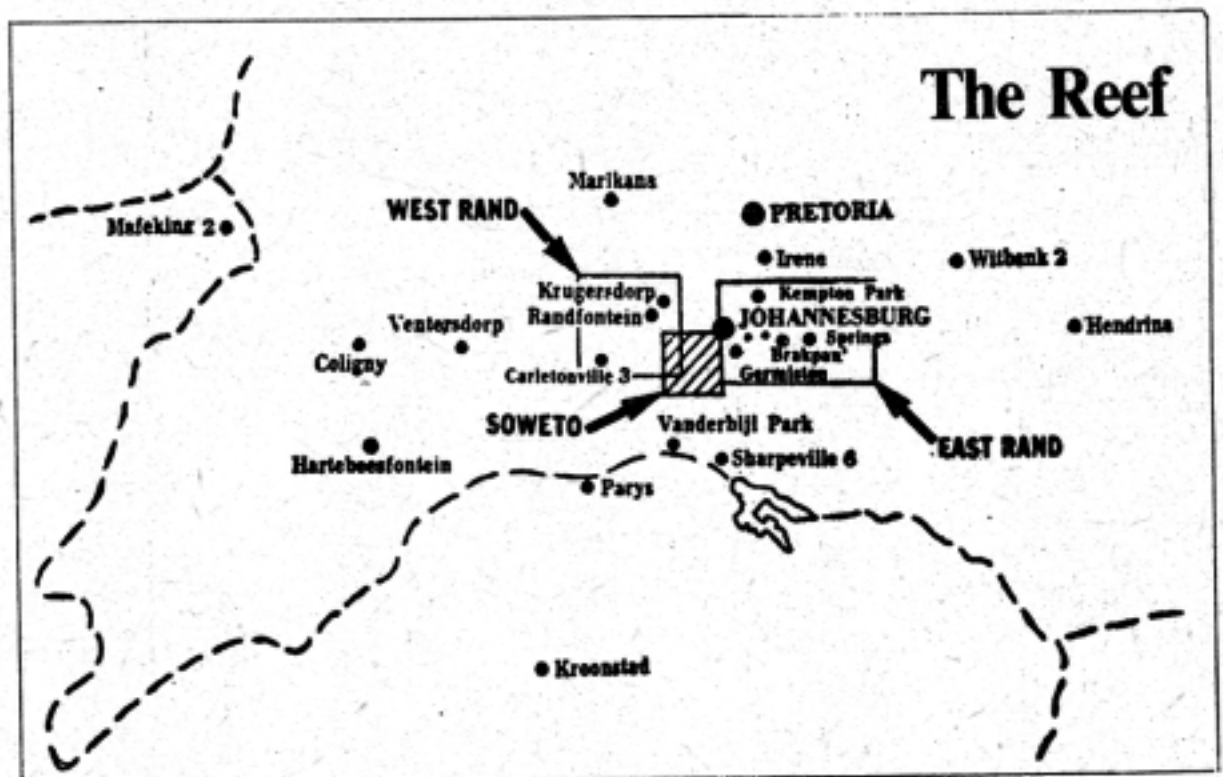
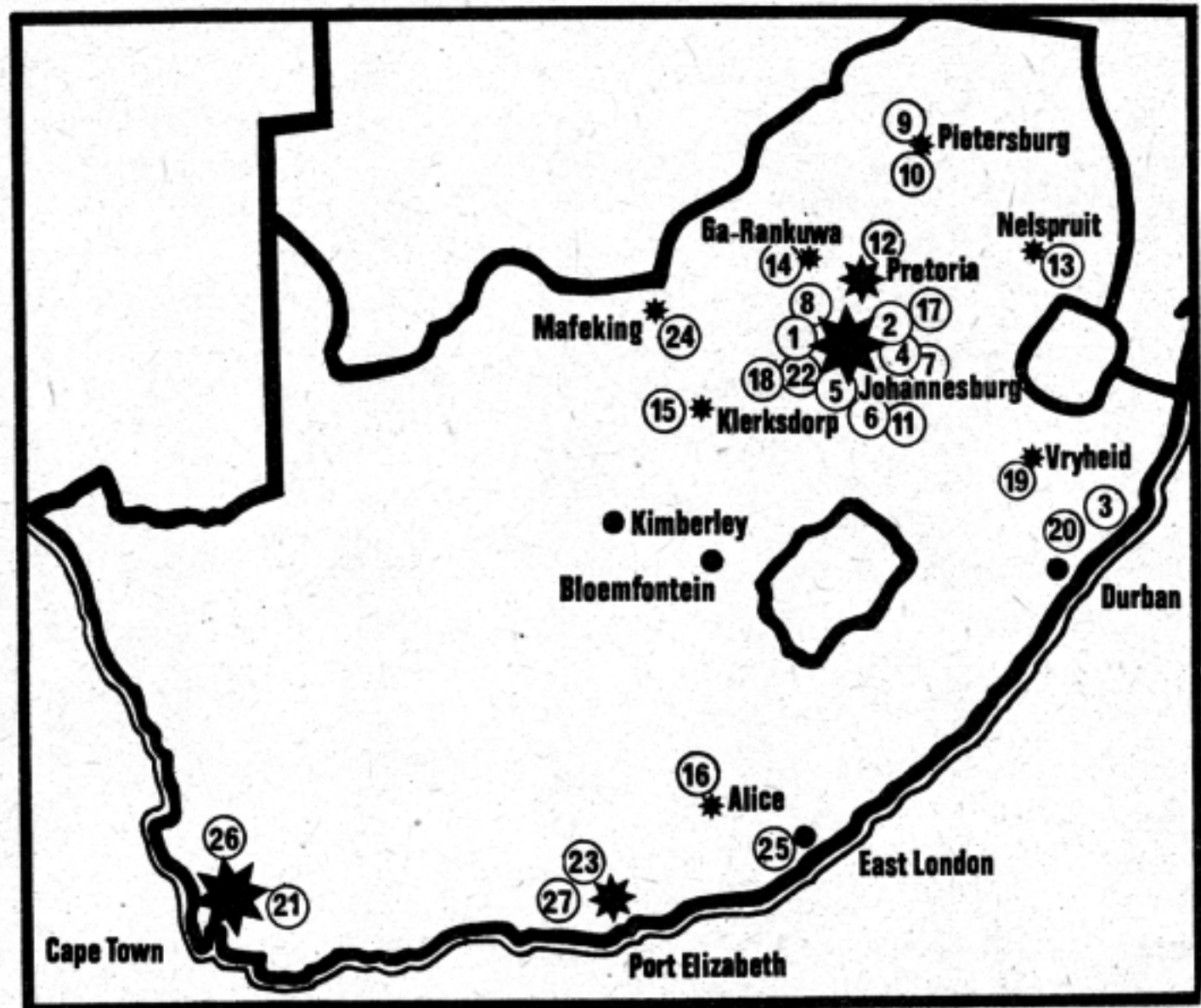
A. Immediately after ASM was formed in these three high schools, messages were transmitted to all the other high schools in the whole of the Republic of South Africa. ASM spread quickly to the other high schools because the students realised that it served their aspirations. By 1972 it was

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN UPRISING

1976

This map shows the nation-wide areas of unrest which started in Soweto, on June 16.

1. June 16: Soweto.
2. June 18: Alexandra township, north-east of Johannesburg.
3. June 18: University of Zululand at Ngoye, near Empangeni.
4. June 18: Tokosa and Daveytown, near Benoni.
5. June 18: Nelspruit and Kathlehong, Germiston.
6. June 18: Vosloorus at Boksburg.
7. June 18: Tembisa, near Kempton Park.
8. June 18: Kagiso at Krugersdorp, West Rand.
9. June 18: University of the North, Turfloop, near Pietersburg.
10. June 20: Seshego township, Pietersburg.
11. June 21: Duduza township, Nigel.
12. June 21: Townships surrounding Pretoria: Mamelodi, Mabopane, Atteridgeville, Hammanskraal.
13. June 22: Lowveld; Lekozi township near Nelspruit.
14. June 22: Ga-Rankuwa in Bophuthatswana homeland.
15. June 23: Jouberton township, near Klerksdorp, Western Transvaal.
16. July 18: University of Fort Hare.
17. July 20: Witbank, Middleburg and Carletonville.
18. July 22: Boipatong township, Vanderbijlpark (Vereeniging).
19. July 25: Zulu Training School, Vryheid.
20. July 26: Ndwedwe, Natal.
21. August 2: UWC boycott at Bellville South.
22. August 4: Soweto violence flares again.
23. August 7: New Brighton, Port Elizabeth (boxing match).
24. August 8: Montshiwa township, near Mafeking.
25. August 9: Mdantsane township, near East London.
26. August 11: Cape Town's three townships; Langa, Nyanga, Guguletu.
27. August 18: New Brighton, Port Elizabeth.



50 decided that since the movement was now national, it should be known as the South African Students Movement, that is SASM. The first congress — we used to

call it the General Students Council — was held at Roodepoort at the beginning of March 1972. I would say almost every school was represented, mainly from

Soweto, the Eastern Transvaal and the Eastern Cape. But almost every other area in the RSA was there. At that stage we concentrated mainly on things like community work. Funds were raised to help disabled people and so on. We also concentrated on creating discussion groups in the schools.

Q. At that early stage was there any kind of consistent political approach evident amongst the students?

A. There were some indications. We were, of course, very alive to the fact that we as black people were being oppressed. The students especially were quite sensitive to this and we were all the time trying to find a way of doing something about it. It was just unfortunate that we were not so clear about how to show our anger and resentment in a clear political way. But we certainly expressed ourselves indirectly in things like poetry writings and so on.

Q. At that stage did the congress see itself as a political campaigning body or rather as a sort of extension of the youth club kind of activities except that it was now concentrated in the schools?

A. No, I would say it was not a youth club extended to schools. It was a students' movement that was beginning the process of sensitizing the students and encouraging them to become more actively involved in the type of surroundings in which they live.

Q. What main grievances emerged at that first congress?

A. Well, primarily it was the issue which affected us very much, that is, Bantu Education. As the congress actually noted Bantu Education was designed to domesticate us rather than to educate us as people. It was designed to prepare us for the labour policies of the government and the ruling class it represented.

Q. Was there any decision taken at that congress to begin to work up opposition in the schools to the whole idea of Bantu Education?

A. Yes, we already started discussing the possibility of action to reject Bantu Education. We organised numerous group discussions to make people aware of the second-rate stuff we were being taught.

For instance, in things like maths; the maths we were taught was very much inferior. We tried to get across the need to fight for the correct type of maths and the correct type of history and so on.

Q. It has been generally spread that SASM was an offshoot of the South African Students Organisation, SASO, and also that it was inspired by the Black Consciousness movement. Could you say something about this.

A. It is not correct to say that SASM was an offshoot of SASO. SASM was formed independently and was quite autonomous. Firstly, it was not actually spearheaded by SASO people; the decision was taken by the people from the youth clubs to cater for the needs of high school students — we did not have in mind to copy what SASO was doing. But many ideas that we used to project, like black consciousness for instance, SASO was also preaching.

Q. During that period there was an upsurge within South Africa especially at the universities which appeared to be connected with the general stress on what has become known as the Black Consciousness movement. To what extent do you think were the younger people at the schools inspired by this kind of activity and by this kind of atmosphere which was being generated amongst the youth generally?

A. Black consciousness as a concept did play a rôle in sensitizing the students. The banning of the ANC left a sort of political vacuum in the field of legal resistance even though the ANC was working underground. We had no direct contact with those who could direct us politically and many of us turned to the general idea of black consciousness as a sensitizing factor. We did not, however, believe that black consciousness on its own would lead us to liberation. It was a useful tool to sensitize students who were not as politically aware as they should have been.

Q. You made the point that the ANC was at that stage operating underground and did not have any direct connection with the group which actually formed SASM. Was the ANC known amongst the youth? Did

its ideas act as any kind of inspiration to the steps that were taken?

A. Certainly. I would say the ANC was known to the students and its ideas influenced many of them. If you ask most students from South Africa which is the most important revolutionary organisation, they will always quote the ANC, its allies, and leaders who are at present detained on Robben Island. Also the work which the ANC did during the 1960s, the 1940s and so on, was known to many students.

Q. But apart from knowledge of the activities of the ANC during the 1940s, 50s and 60s, at the time when SASM was formed was there awareness of the ANC as an underground movement? Were the youth aware of the fact that it was functioning and attempting to continue the struggle not necessarily by mass open campaigning but in some other way?

A. Yes, there clearly was such awareness. There were political trials concerning

ANC. We knew that the ANC was operating because we would hear that this person was being charged in Durban, in Cape Town, in Grahamstown, and so on. We would always hear from the papers of ANC activity. We heard about the operations in which ANC guerrillas were involved with the fascist police and soldiers in Zimbabwe, as they were trying to go back home to begin the war of liberation in South Africa. From time to time there were ANC pamphlets and journals which we sued to get and we saw very little of any underground activity except by the ANC.

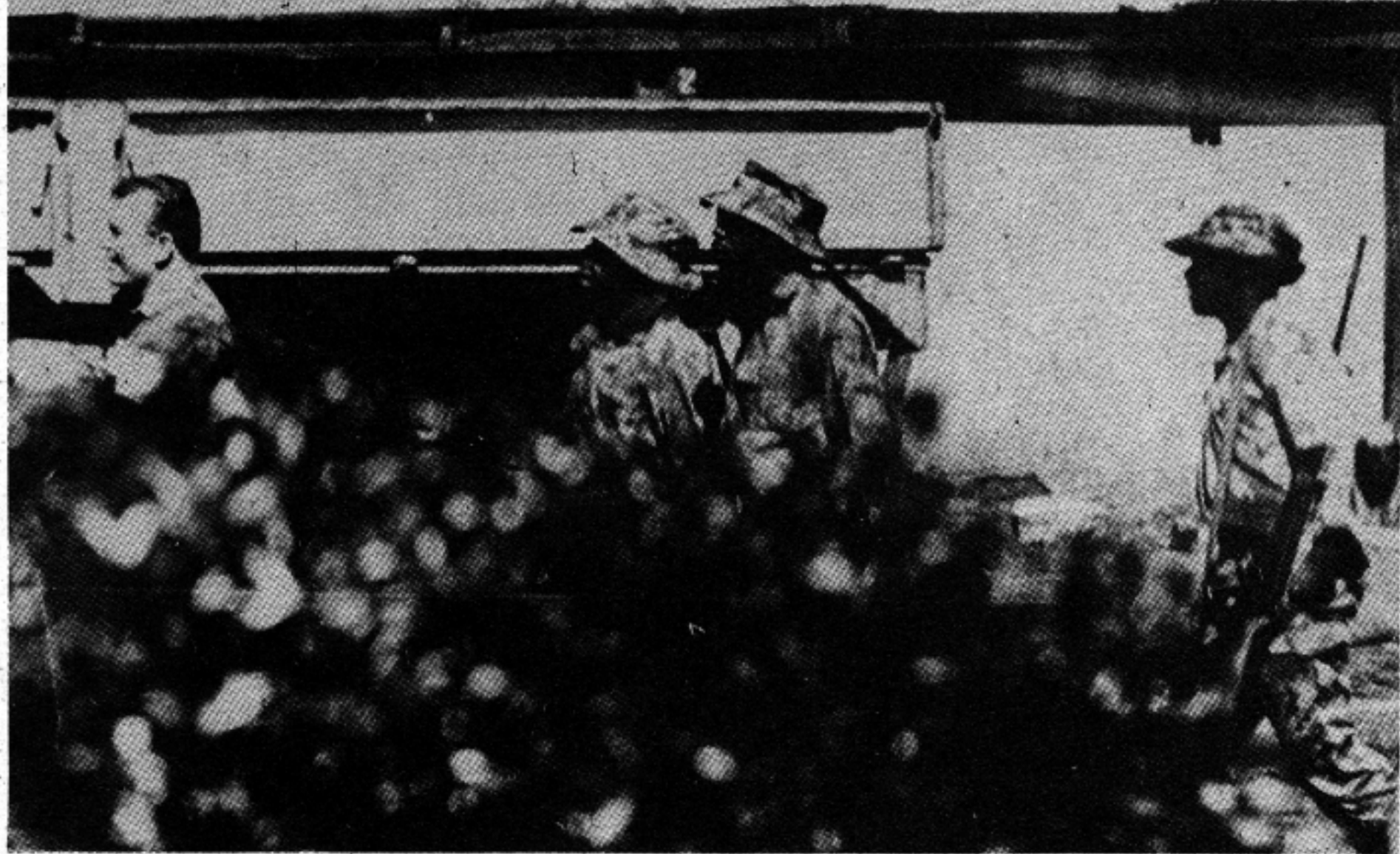
Q. Will you now give us a short outline of the development of student organisation in the schools from 1971 onwards?

A. From 1971 on SASM went on growing from high school to high school. As you know, when a thing is new it causes some excitement; the students joined SASM in large numbers. They used to have their local meetings at their high schools,

How an FM bullet lifts off and destroys the whole front of the head leaving 'a skull'



Beechies Chewing Gum. It's the thing to share.



Hunting children

discussing many problems affecting students and more general problems which were connected with the system of oppression, the misuse of our parents by the government and all those things. Then in '72 we had another congress at which new office-bearers were elected. Most of them were harassed by police because SASM was now attaining momentum and it was going from strength to strength. In 1973 the same thing happened — some of the members were forced to leave the country and went to Botswana. In 1974 about six members of SASM were arrested; most of them were from the Morris Isaacson High School and Orlando West High School. Some of the students were again forced to leave the country. In 1975 the same thing happened. There was a trial in Grahams-town in which people were charged under the Suppression of Communism Act and Terrorism Act.

Q. Before 1976 was there any stage at which any of the students began to organise themselves into more tightly-knit groups in order to meet the enemy's attacks against the kind of open organisation which SASM was becoming and which exposed it to continuous harassment?

A. In 1974 small organised group were created which used to meet in secret places. Those cells were concentrated mostly in Soweto, Durban and so on. To be specific and to be direct: they were initiated by the national liberation movement, that is, the ANC.

Q. In what way were they initiated by the ANC? Were they formed by the ANC, or did they establish connections with the ANC?

A. They were formed by the ANC. We in SASM did not actually think of forming such things. We were operating legally and



'Situation is very bad' says chief of police

tried to keep SASM as a broad legal organisation. But some of us listened to our elders from the ANC when they said we needed more than just mass legal organisation. Hence we founded these underground cells.

54 Q. The Soweto events themselves date

from June 16. That is when the world became aware of the massive nature of the student protests. But obviously these events must have been preceded by some kind of preparation. Could you give us a brief description of the build-up period prior to June 16.

A. The immediate issue was, as we know, the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction by Vorster's regime. When the directive from the Bantu Education Department was issued that certain subjects should be taught in the medium of Afrikaans, the students reacted very negatively. As early as March 1976, Thomas Mofolo was the first school to have Afrikaans imposed on it, and immediately there was a student protest. In March 1976, the principal called in the police to cool the students and force them to accept Afrikaans. Some students from my school, Naledi High School, went there to investigate their problems. We also visited schools in Meadowlands. We found that these students also felt bitter about what the government was doing. They immediately stopped attending classes because they felt as we did that what was needed was a positive reaction.

Q. Was this in March that they stopped attending classes?

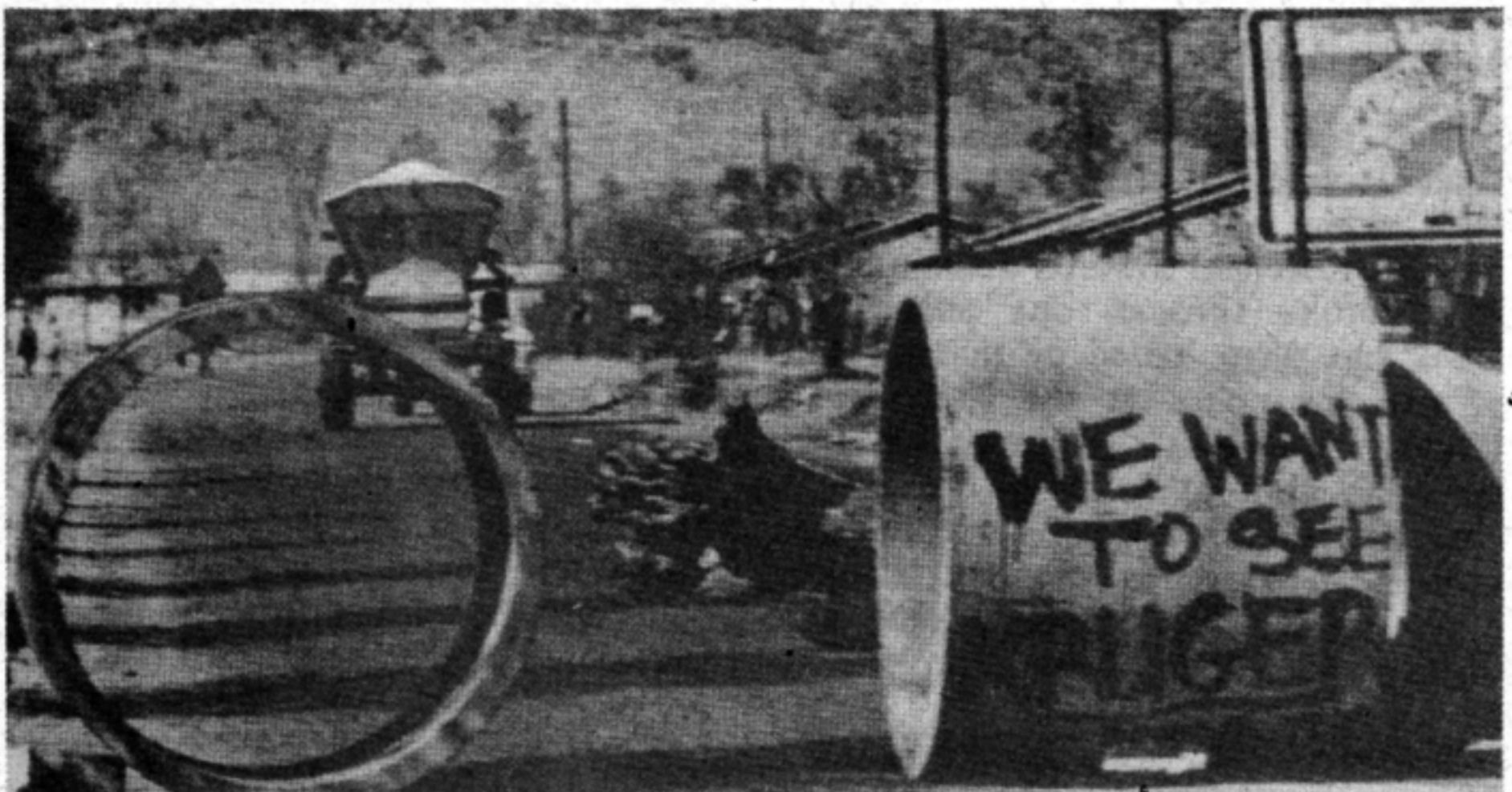
A. Yes, it was in March. Then the local parents committee intervened taking the matter to the Bantu Education inspector who was arrogant and very adamant about imposing Afrikaans. The Naledi High SASM branch also went to Orlando West

Junior Secondary where we spoke to the students. The students there agreed with us and started destroying their books and refused to attend classes. And this is where the first effective protest started in Soweto. It was effective in Orlando West Junior Secondary School because the students there were quite clear about what they wanted. They were just not prepared to listen to what the government was saying. Despite the threat by the Bantu Education inspector that the schools would be closed and that they would be chased out of school, they remained very firm in what they were doing. We went on to other high schools, to other junior secondary schools and other higher primaries. By May 1976, the protest actions were quite general in many schools.

Q. In this period, were there any positive acts of resistance in any of these schools?

A. In Orlando West at one higher primary school, the principal there called in the police to cool the students and to force them to go back to classes. The students reacted by stoning the police who came there. These were just the signs of the real thing that was on its way.

'Hippo' confronted by Soweto roadblock



Q. What happened after this initial period during March, April, May when the situation was beginning to simmer in all these schools?

A. Early in June the police sent their men to collect one of our colleagues. I think it was the 4th of June. We did not see them when they came that day. They arrested one student but he was later released. Then on the 8th they came again. Hey, it was unfortunate for them to be seen by the students. They were beaten and their car was burnt. On that day they were coming to arrest our local secretary of SASM at our school. He was going to be arrested in connection with the student protests in Soweto schools.

Q. After these events on about June 8 at Naledi, what steps did the students in Soweto take to organise themselves further?

A. We took a decision to inform the staff that we totally reject the half-yearly examinations and were not going to write the exams until our demands were met. Then the Naledi branch called a meeting under SASM on Sunday, June 13 where it was actually decided that there should be positive action from all the high schools and secondary schools in Soweto. About 300 to 400 students attended, representing the whole of Soweto. We discussed the issue of Afrikaans and how to make the government aware that we opposed their decision. The delegates decided that there

should be a mass demonstration from the Soweto students as a whole. The most important question was on which day, and how to start. We decided to have a committee that would take charge of the whole thing. We decided to take two members from each school in Soweto. The idea was to form a committee of students who were going to take decisions on the form and timing of the occasions in Soweto.

Q. Did this action committee have a name?

A. It was known only as the Action Committee of SASM.

Q. We have since heard of the activities of a body known as the Soweto Students Representative Council — SSRC. How was that body connected with this Action Committee which was appointed at this conference on June 13?

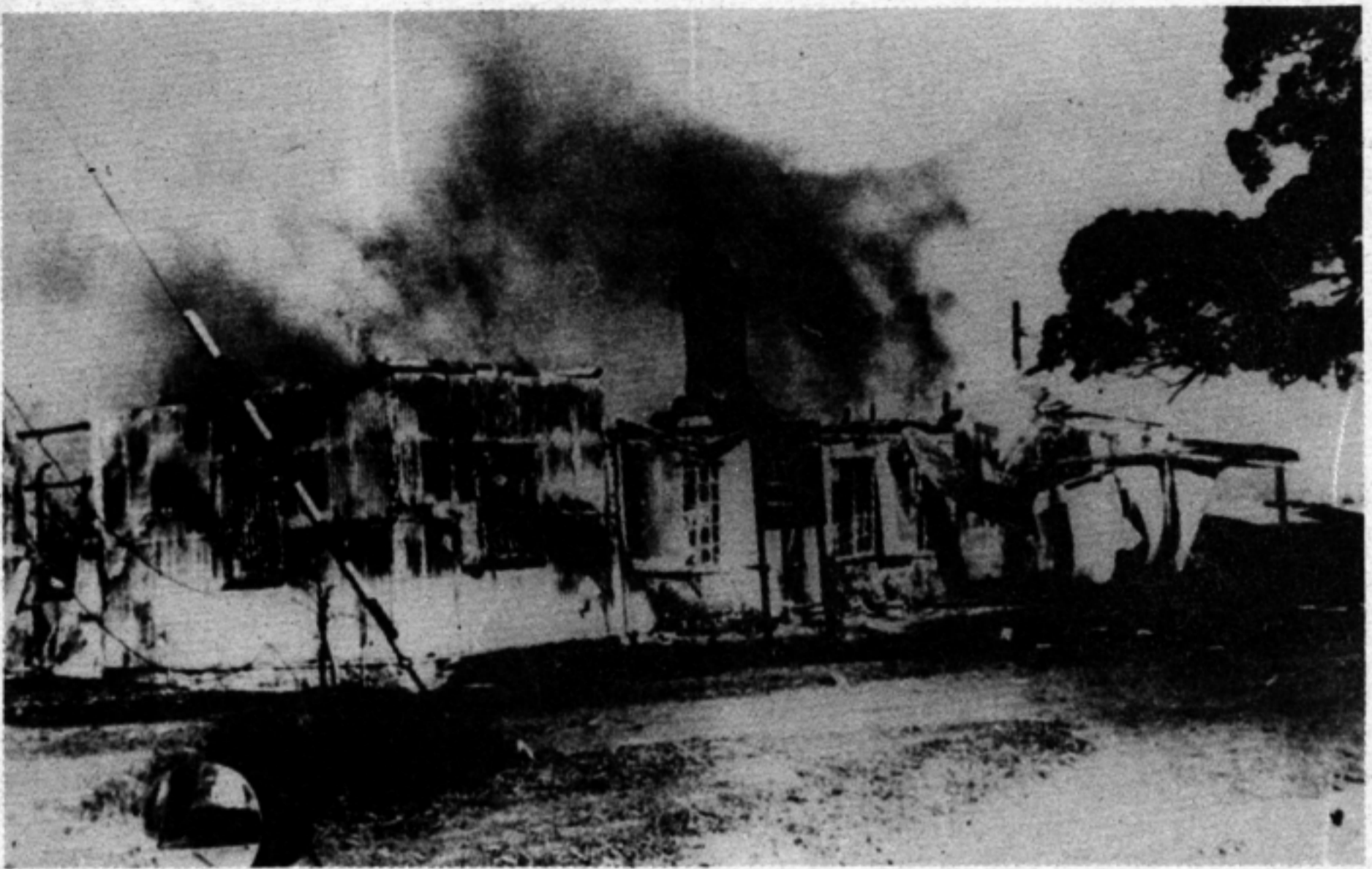
A. The SSRC is the same as the Action Committee. It was called the SSRC immediately after June 16 for strategic reasons.

Q. Did the conference itself plan to have a violent or peaceful demonstration?

A. The demonstration we planned was to be peaceful because as students we were, of course, unarmed. But we knew that the police would be violent against the students. So we said no, immediately there is violence from the police, we would have to defend ourselves and, if possible, hit back.

Teargas in Soweto





Chief targets of the demonstrators were administrative buildings

Q. There have been quite a number of actions against shebeens and bottle stores. In what way did the youth believe that these establishments were used to oppress the people.

A. To answer this question I'll quote one slogan that read "Less liquor, good education". The S.A. Government has built numerous bottle stores, beer halls and shebeens next to the stations. We believe that they are there to misdirect the black people. Most of the bottle stores are next to the stations so that when our fathers and mothers come from work, they drink and forget about their surroundings.

Q. I don't actually want to deal with the events of that day in detail because they are very well known to the world. I think it is clear that the police reaction was perhaps amongst the most violent in the history of South Africa and that on that day many hundreds of students were murdered by police bullets. Could you describe the events which took place after that day and tell us how the leaders of the student movement went on to pursue the struggle further.

A. Immediately after the first shootings of that day the students reacted by stoning the police and carried out other actions. Immediately after that we told our students to do what they could to spread the actions to other locations. The struggle went on for some days immediately after June at the same pace because at that time the Action Committee was meeting everywhere in an attempt to intensify the struggle so that it should really be felt by the Government.

Q. The struggle spread throughout the country within a short while. Was the spread of the struggle all organised by any centralised body, or did it have a spontaneous element to it?

A. SASM is a national organisation and has regional and local branches. If a certain member of a team is doing something that is right, the rest of the team will join him to do it; it was not always a matter of having to instigate the others to do it.

Q. It seems to be clear that it is impossible to meet and destroy the enemy in the streets by mass confrontation between people who have got guns and

those who just have stones in their hands. Was there any discussion about trying to raise the struggle to a higher level and to organise more effective kind of action to back up what the students had been doing?

A. We had the stay-away. History repeats itself. This wasn't the first time the blacks had a stay-away. We copied this stay-away campaign from the ANC.

Q. In whose name was the stay-away called. Which organisation called upon the people to stay away from work?

A. The very same SSRC. They typed pamphlets and distributed them to our parents to join. Leaflets were also issued by the ANC underground. The idea was to cripple the economy of the country.

Q. During the Soweto events we also heard of a body called the Black Parents' Association. Could you give us a short description of the rôle played by this organisation.

A. The main activity of the Black Parents Association was to get figures of how many people died. It was also there to help give material assistance to people who were injured in the police shootings. It also had meetings with the authorities. We felt it was impossible for us as SSRC to meet Vorster and the so-called Minister of Bantu Education, M.C. Botha. We felt that they knew what we wanted and it was pointless for us to meet them.

Q. What is your estimate of the number of people who had been massacred by the police since the June 16 events?

A. I think they exceed one thousand two hundred (1,200) because after the first few days the Black Parents Association had a Commission of Inquiry. We discovered that in Baragwanath alone we had something like 238 people dead. There were others in the police stations, mortuaries and so on. The official figure of 176 is clearly a lie. And people are still dying.

Q. Now looking back on these events which are, of course, still going on sporadically: what do you consider to be the main significance of the happenings since June 16 as far as South African youth are concerned?

A. Primarily that the youth of South Africa are fed-up with the status quo. It is clear that the youth is ready for action now. We no longer believe in talking and talking. We believe in positive action. Things like armed struggle. Students were attacking the police even without arms. It shows that the youth are quite ready for the big thing. Also the youth have gained a rich experience of struggle. This provides fertile ground for the armed struggle and other types of positive action against the racist regime.

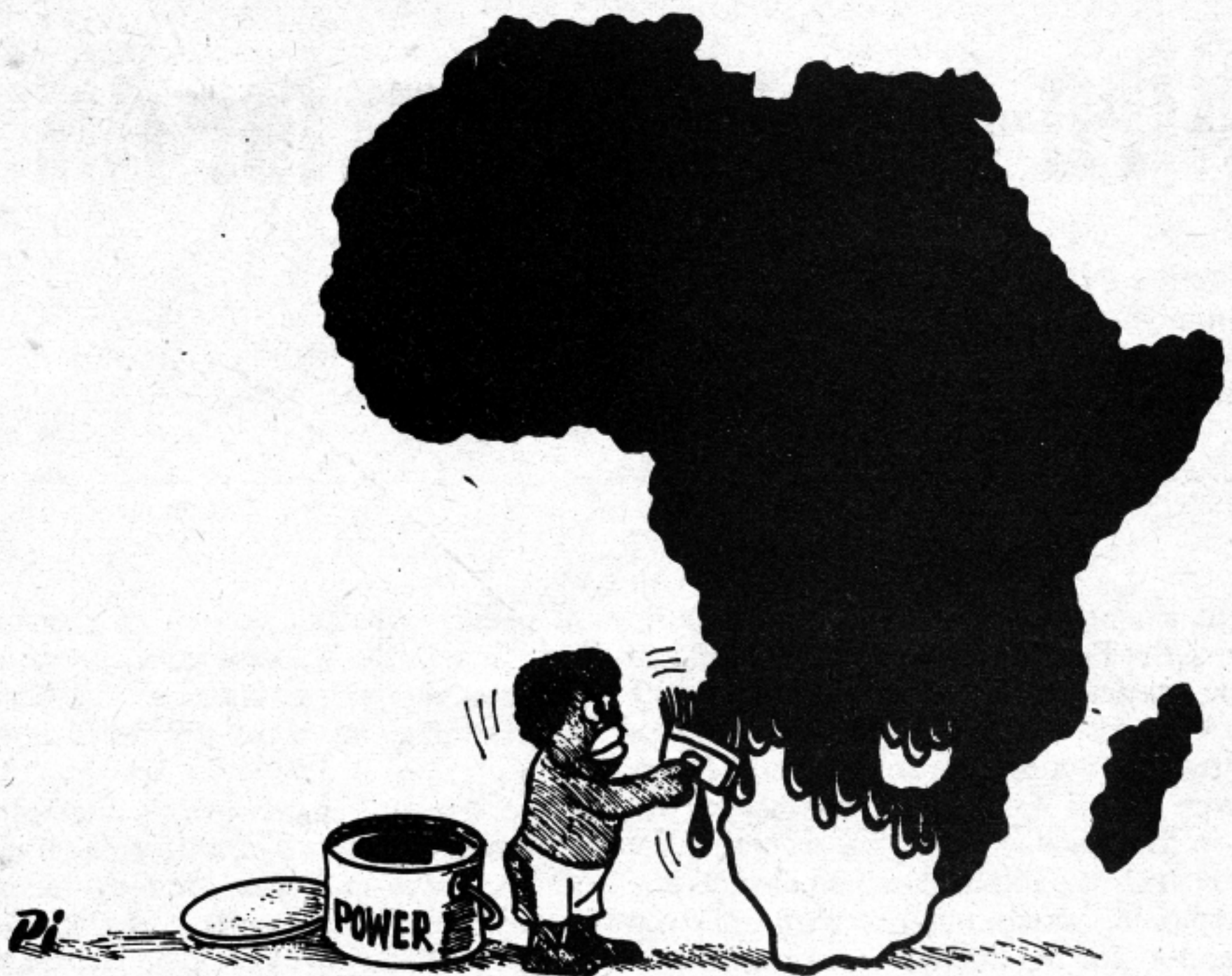
Q. We know that soon after June 16, the government, in an attempt to stop the nation-wide demonstrations, retreated on the question of Afrikaans. We also know that despite that retreat the students continued to go in for their militant actions. Could you comment on this.

A. Afrikaans was not the real issue. It provided the spark that fell on top of the powder keg that was building up amongst the African people as a whole. Afrikaans happened to be the immediate issue. The real issues are racism, oppression and exploitation.

Q. So what you are really saying is that behind the actions of the majority of the youth who took part in these demonstrations, was the issue of the destruction of the oppressive state and the ending of racist exploitation in South Africa. In what way have these particular demonstrations helped prepare the youth for the higher and more advanced stage of struggle?

A. First of all I would say that it has made them more sensitive to the situation they live in. The youth are listening to what their leaders are saying. When they are assigned to do a job by the leaders, they do it without hesitation. There is not the hesitation of the past of a person fearing arrest and so on. The people are more involved. It is their experience of struggle at home that has removed this fear from them: fear of the police, fear of the government. They are more and more involving themselves in the fight against racism, social injustice and exploitation.

Q. I think it is clear to all that through



this form of struggle alone — the confrontation in the streets — the enemy cannot be effectively met and destroyed. How then do you believe the youth see the future of the basic struggle in South Africa?

A. The youth have now seen more clearly than ever the necessity of armed struggle at home. We understand better that we are not dealing with people who are prepared to listen to us. We are dealing with people who are ready to go all out to maintain the status quo by absolute force. We must answer in the same way.

Q. If you are correct in saying that the youth is aware that the only long-term answer is to meet the enemy in armed confrontation, do you think that, therefore, there is no longer place in the South African situation for the kind of mass struggle in which the youth have been engaged in the last six months? And if you

think there is room for those kinds of struggles, do you think that their form ought to remain the same or that new ways ought to continuously be found in order to combine the political and armed struggle?

A. I think there is a place for what is happening to continue. But it should be developed into something more advanced than the initial actions. We know the struggle is not static. It is dynamic so we have got to get new approaches for struggle. The very act of struggle will teach the youth new advanced methods of raising the struggle to a higher level and to find new forms of organising at home. It is important for the youth to know that they are part of the great movement which has the responsibility for bringing about our total liberation. It is above all important for the youth to connect their activity with this great national liberation movement, the ANC.