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South Africa

Soweto: the black students' rebellion of 1976

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Its forty years today since a peaceful demonstration by black students in Soweto was met by brutal police violence. resulting in the death of twenty three people.

The national uprising by students in 1976 marked a decisive turning point in South Africa's history. Together with the Durban strikes of 1973, it shattered the political quiescence that followed the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. On June 16, thousands of black students in Soweto embarked on a peaceful march to object to the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. But the police responded with violence, killing Hector Pieterse, Hastings Ndlovu and several other young black children. As a result, what started as a protest against the state's language policy rapidly transformed into a struggle against "the system", which spread across the country.

Henceforth townships such as Soweto, Alexandra and Bonteheuwel became the epicentres of the struggle against apartheid. A defining feature of the 1976 uprising was the decisive entry of black students onto the stage of history. Until the 1960s, the number of Africans in schools remained relatively low. But the urban African population was growing, especially the number of young people. And industry required a larger pool of industrial labour. So there was a rapid expansion of schooling for Africans.

In 1976 there were 3.8 million Africans in schools. Nearly 10% percent of those were in secondary schools. In Soweto alone the number of secondary school students increased from approximately 12,500 to more than 34,000.

What these figures highlight is the emergence of a new social force in South Africa. They shared similar experiences. They were based at institutions where they could be relatively easily organized into a significant political force. Once mobilized behind the banner for liberation, black youth became leading actors in the struggle to defeat apartheid. The trigger that ignited this transformation was the apartheid government's determination to impose its racist policies on black South Africans.

Bantu Education aimed to entrench the oppression of Africans and to prepare them for unskilled employment. Apartheid's foremost ideologue, H.F. Verwoerd, insisted there was no place for Africans "in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live."

According to this racist rationale, education for Africans was designed to prepare them to tend to the needs of white society. To meet this objective, they had to be taught in the languages of whites: English and Afrikaans. Although this policy was on the books from the 1950s, the government insisted on its implementation from the early 1970s.

At the time, the apartheid rulers felt emboldened by the successful repression of black resistance. They imagined that their ideology would remain unchallenged.

The spirit of Tiro

In retrospect, the events of 16 June 1976 shook the country to the core. But at the time they caught many by surprise. Consequently, one of the main narratives about the rebellion has been that it was a spontaneous outburst of

anger by black students. For the apartheid state and white society, this version conformed to their racist belief that black protests were irrational and destructive, and that black students could not formulate political demands or organise protests without the incitement of outside "agitators".

In fact, the historic march was the culmination of months of mobilisation and years of rebuilding township-based resistance organisations. From the early 1970s a largely autonomous process of building political cells and networks began to unfold in townships across the country. The first cells were small, disconnected and often temporary. Many of them were created by school students who were searching for ways collectively to develop their political education and to mobilise limited forms of protest.

Most of these political activities were either inspired or directly initiated by the Black Consciousness Movement. Its popularity grew rapidly after the 1969 launch of the university-based South African Students' Organisation (SASO). In March 1973 SASO initiated the formation of the South African Students' Movement (SASM) to organize among school students. Black Consciousness ideas of psychological liberation, black pride and leadership, and challenging the status quo enjoyed strong support from the majority of students in these movements.

This spirit of black defiance was most memorably demonstrated in April 1972 at Turfloop University, when the president of the SRC, Onkgopotse Tiro, delivered his historic graduation speech in which he mounted a scathing critique of white authority. For this he was expelled. This led to a mass solidarity strike at the university. Thereafter, Tiro was briefly employed as a part-time history teacher in 1973 at Morris Isaacson School in Soweto, where he inspired students to become politically involved. Tiro and other BC figures embodied confidence and defiance. But it was the loss of fear that they instilled that arguably defined the youthful uprising of 1976.

The road to June 16

Opposition to the imposition of Afrikaans commenced within weeks of the new academic year in 1976. Students at Thomas Mofolo Secondary School in Soweto were among the first to take action. On 24 February, they confronted the principal about the new language policy. Sporadic protests occurred between March and mid-May. They tended to be confined to individual schools and were usually quickly quelled by the police. During this time, Phefeni Junior Secondary emerged as a prominent site of mobilisation, particularly the Form Two students who were directly affected by the introduction of Afrikaans. They first employed a "go slow" tactic to bring their dissatisfaction to the school's attention.

When their pleas were rejected, the students embarked on a class boycott from 16 May. This action introduced a critical shift in gear of the protests: on 19 May, schools in the surrounding area launched a solidarity boycott, involving approximately 1,600 students. An informal co-ordinating body was established, mainly comprising junior secondary schools, which attempted to unite these separate struggles. Seth Mazibuko, a senior student at Phefeni, was a pivotal figure in these efforts.

A week later, under the pressure of the mounting protests in Soweto, the annual General Students' Council of SASM passed a resolution offering unambiguous support to the junior students: it undertook "[t]o fully pledge solidarity with the schools on strike against Afrikaans being used as a medium of instruction [and] to actively sympathise with those schools on strike." Thereafter, SASM leaders became actively involved in the movement and worked with the co-ordinating committee of the junior secondary schools to convene a meeting of student representatives from all over Soweto on Sunday, 13 June, at the Donaldson Community Centre in Orlando East.

This was an historic meeting at which activists committed themselves to support the boycotting students by

organising solidarity action. An Action Committee was established, comprising members of the SASM leadership and the junior secondary schools' co-ordinating committee, including Tsietsi Mashinini, Murphy Morobe, Seth Mazibuko, David Kutumela and Isaiah Molefe. The scene was set for the march that would change the course of history.

June 16, 17 and 18 witnessed unprecedented state violence, first in the streets of Soweto and then in townships across the country, resulting in scores of deaths and hundreds of injured. At the same time, students in Alexandra, East Rand, Cape Town and elsewhere mobilized solidarity action with their Soweto comrades, producing the first national anti-apartheid movement since the early 1960s. Having failed to crush this movement, the state abandoned its Afrikaans medium policy on July 6.

Student and worker unity

This victory did not end the struggle. Students now refocused their campaign against state repression and Bantu Education as a whole. A crucial question posed then was how to extend the struggle beyond the schools, especially by involving parents and workers. Black parents have been accused of acquiescing in apartheid and being cowed into submission by state repression. Their apparent silence over the issue of Afrikaans has also been contrasted with the militancy of the students' rebellion. While this may be true for many parents, it would be wrong to assume that parents or teachers did not object to the state's policy on Afrikaans.

In fact, some of them voiced opposition as early as 1974, but mainly through the politically moderate School Boards, which were generally ignored by the white education authorities. Mr Kambule, the Orlando High principal, captured the generational divergence on this issue early June 1976: "School children are doing exactly what the parents and everybody feels about Afrikaans – only they had the courage to stand up against it."

Undoubtedly, many parents feared state repression, which had become increasingly brutal during the 1960s. They also feared what would happen to their children. Nonetheless, some parents had begun to organize themselves to address the education crisis, and on June 17 the Soweto Parents' Association (SPA) met student leaders to show their solidarity. Soon thereafter, the SPA renamed itself the Black Parents' Association, which went on to play an important role in Soweto's political resistance.

In early August the Action Committee established the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC), consisting of two representatives per school, to co-ordinate students' struggles. Tsietsi Mashinini was elected as chairman. The new student leadership immediately launched a campaign for the immediate release of all detained students. The first action was a march to the police headquarters in Johannesburg.

Crucially, the SSRC appealed to parents and workers to stay away from work and join their march to John Vorster Square. On 4 August, approximately 20,000 residents marched along the Soweto Highway, the main road between the township and the city. Although the police stopped the march, the action highlighted the power of solidarity between students and workers. Emboldened by this success, the SSRC called for a second stayaway for 23 to 25 August. This was by all accounts a successful demonstration of the SSRC's capacity to unite students and workers behind clear political demands.

Most significantly, a reported 75% of Johannesburg's African workforce was absent on 23 August. This was not only an improvement on the figures of the previous stayaway, but also represented the largest strike in Johannesburg since the early 1960s. But, there was one constituency that did not heed the call for a stayaway: the hostel dwellers, who tended to be aloof from the township's life and politics.

Students also seemed to have made little effort to explain their campaign to the hostel dwellers. In fact, they viewed

these migrant workers as strike-breakers and confronted them, which led to violence. At this point, the police joined in a sinister alliance with the Urban Bantu Council to mobilise the aggrieved hostel dwellers to launch an attack on township residents.

On the morning of 24 August a crowd of hostel dwellers, armed with an assortment of "traditional weapons", descended on Orlando West and Meadowlands, attacking young people indiscriminately. The community organized self-defence and over the next few days Meadowlands and Orlando West resembled war zones, which led to dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries.

Within days the SSRC issued a pamphlet aiming to make common cause with the hostel dwellers: "The students have nothing against people living in the hostels, they are our parents, they are victims of the notorious migrant labour system. They are forced to live hundreds of miles away from their families, their needs and grievances are ignored by the powers that be... The students reject, in toto, the entire oppressive system with its largely pocket institutions like the UBC 's and the bantustans, those toy telephones are designed to divide the Black community. United we stand".

This intervention was part of a concerted effort to build unity among the different sectors of Soweto's population. It aimed particularly to involve hostel dwellers early and directly in plans for a third stayaway from 13 to 15 September. The shift in tactics yielded positive results and, in sharp contrast to the August events, migrant workers were active in mobilising support for the planned action. As a result, the stayaway was the most successful of the three strikes called by the SSRC.

In fact, the September strike was a national success, with large numbers of coloured and African workers in Cape Town joining the action. The generation of 1976 understood that in order to challenge the power of the state, it was necessary to forge a strategic alliance with workers. In the years following the uprising, many young activists joined the independent trade union movement and built civic organisations, which laid the organisational basis for the unity of workers and students in the 1980s. A similar strategic task now confronts the current generation of black student activists.