

Part 2: June 1976 - The uprising



Protest at
Luthuli House,
Johannesburg
CBD - October
2015

Soweto Uprising and its Immediate Causes

In 1975 the Minister of Bantu Education decided that half of the subjects in standard five and form one must be taught in Afrikaans. There was widespread opposition to the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. The argument was that students were not familiar with Afrikaans and this was seen as a political attempt at further subjugating blacks to the apartheid system, whose symbol was Afrikaans.

There were go-slows by students who were affected by the introduction of Afrikaans before the class boycott of 17 May, 1976, at Phefeni Junior Secondary School in Soweto. During the boycott of 17 May 1976 students at Phefeni Junior Secondary School highlighted the fact that Afrikaans was not conducive to learning subjects such as Maths, Science and Geography. Some of the schools in the area joined in the boycott, while others returned to classes. On May 19, the boycott at Phefeni Junior Secondary School took a militant turn when students threw out their Afrikaans books.

On 13 June 1976 SASM decided to hold a mass demonstration against the enforcement of Afrikaans. On 16 June 1976 about 20 000 students marched in protest against Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Police responded with violence and hundreds of students were killed, others were arrested and large numbers of students went to exile and joined the banned liberation movements.

Reflecting on the problem of using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, Nyanisile Jack, a student of 1976, says, "Of course, the uprising itself in the beginning was limited to the students, the main or immediate issue being the

question of the imposition of Afrikaans. You had to do half of your courses in Afrikaans; out of six subjects, half had to be done in Afrikaans and the rest in English. This was an affront, you know, a direct affront by the Pretoria Government, on the students which they [the students] couldn't take, so they began to protest through meetings and so on. This was mainly in Soweto. Later on, it led to marches, which the police responded to by using firepower. And that whole thing sparked what you call 'the uprising'.

The uprisings spread to other parts of the country. Students in places such as Cape Town, Klerksdorp, Bothaville, and many other places engaged in militant action, which challenged apartheid education and apartheid as a political system.

Causes of the 1976 uprisings

There are four related factors, which led to the student uprisings in 1976.

1. There was a crisis in schooling, which expressed itself in the shortage of classrooms and teachers, overcrowding, and a high student-teacher ratio. Teachers were poorly qualified, and buildings and equipment was also of poor quality. There was a high failure rate and this was compounded by the fact that in the 1970s the increase in the number of secondary schools meant that a large number of drop-outs could not find work due to changing economic conditions in the country. Into this already difficult situation was the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction.
2. The economy in the early 1970s was in recession. Many black workers were laid off. Black matriculants faced poor employment opportunities. The poverty

datum line in Soweto was estimated at R129.05. But, the average family was estimated to be earning R75 per month. So many people were experiencing economic pressure at the time of June 1976.

3. There were problems of apartheid. Townships such as Soweto were overcrowded and there were inadequate facilities like transport and housing. Problems like pass laws, influx control and compulsory homeland citizenship were all grievances black people held. These grievances were part of the background of the 1976 uprisings.
4. There was an atmosphere of revolt in the 1970s. There were liberation struggles in Southern African countries like Zimbabwe, Angola, and Mozambique. There was also the Black Consciousness Movement which contributed to this atmosphere of revolt. In 1973, workers in Durban and other parts of the country had come out in significant strikes.

Students and Workers in 1976

Initially, students were preoccupied with stopping workers from going to work instead of engaging workers as social agents with a critical role to play in the struggle against apartheid and capitalism. Students had forgotten that it was workers who came out and struck in 1973 with comparatively less student support. Some of the tactics employed by students in compelling workers not to go to work included stoning buses that were used by workers as a mode of transport. Migrant workers from Mzimhlophe single-sex hostel went on the rampage in August 1976 when students attempted to enforce a stay-away. The police backed the migrant workers who attacked students and other township residents.

At the beginning of August 1976, workers stayed away from work and marched with students to John Vorster

Prison in Johannesburg. They also participated in other stay-aways (azikhwelwa) in September 1976. But the conception of worker participation was seen as parents helping their children. Parents or workers were not seen as agents for social change in themselves. The fact that this conception of struggle and the role of the working class was undeveloped could be seen in a number of confrontations between workers and students in 1976. In November 1976 another stay-away was called and workers did not respond.

Achievements of the 1976 uprisings

The costs of the 1976 uprising were high for the working class, including the students. More than a thousand people died, and many, many more were injured.

One of the major gains of the uprising was the fact that Afrikaans was scrapped as a medium of instruction. There was some increase in education expenditure in the post 1976 period. Of course, black education continued to be less funded in relation to white education and education remained segregated.

A number of students who came out of the 1976 uprising fled the country and joined the liberation movement in exile. A number of people from the generation of 1976 also joined the trade union movement and became leading layers in the workers' struggles in the 1980s. The events of 1976 were also available for drawing lessons for purposes of taking up struggles in the 1980s.

The state responded by banning political organisations such as the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC), SASM and many other Black Consciousness organisations, in 1977. Steve Bantu Biko, a leader of the BC movement, was killed in prison in 1977. This was another blow for the BC movement.

“Not black enough for NSFAS” - a protestor’s placard at the Union Buildings - October 2015.

