

Part 1: The Road to Soweto June 1976 - Repression and Resurgence



The crushing of mass resistance in the early 1960s – signaled by the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the liberation movements – was followed by the growth and expansion of the manufacturing sector in South Africa in the 1960s. This led to the growth of the black working class and its concentration in residential areas in the big cities. The factory system of the manufacturing sector at that time required larger numbers of workers. At the same time the manufacturing sector needed semi- skilled workers who had basic literacy that would enable them to participate in the production processes in factories.

The introduction of Bantu Education in 1953 and the expansion of basic schooling among blacks thereafter, were consistent with the economic needs of the manufacturing sector i.e. a semi-skilled labour force. The increase in the number of students in schools and the townships laid the ground for student resistance in 1970s and the 1980s. In other words, by creating a bigger black student population, apartheid and the manufacturing sector were digging their own grave. It is the students who were created by the conditions of the economic expansion in the 1960s, who were part of the forces that confronted apartheid and capitalism in 1976 and in the 1980s.

Repression, economic boom, and a new layer of workers in the 1960s

Following the banning of the liberation movements in 1960s, and the repression of trade unions, the road was open for the super-exploitation of black labour. The 1960s were a decade of unprecedented economic growth in South Africa as the country became more attractive to foreign direct investment. The attacks on the black working class resistance and organisations in the early 1960s paved the way for the economic boom. For example, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased by an annual average rate of 9.3% between 1962 and 1968 compared with a

5.2% increase from 1957 to 1962. The rapid expansion of the economy was attributable to the manufacturing and construction sectors of the economy. For example, between the period 1963 and 1968 the physical output of manufacturing rose by 8.4% per annum compared to a 5.4 % increase between 1958 and 1963. The construction sector's output moved from 2.8% per annum in the period 1958 to 1968, to 4.8% per annum in the period 1963 to 1968.

Manufacturing dominated other sectors and increased employment and the productivity of labour. The number of workers employed in manufacturing increased by 63% between 1960 and 1970. Labour productivity in the sector increased because of the tendency towards the use of machines in the labour process, together with the high rate of exploitation and repression. Unlike the 1940s and 1950s, factories in the 1960s were large and that meant the many workers were brought under the same roof.

The creation of this new large and semi-skilled layer had important consequences for the future of shop floor struggles and the broader political struggle in South Africa.

Firstly, unlike their unskilled counterparts, the new semi-skilled layer of black workers was not easy to replace. This gave the new layer of workers more power on the shop floor. Secondly, these workers were a relatively educated group of workers, and this made it easy for them to acquire the organisational and political leadership skills needed to wage a sustained struggle against capitalism and apartheid. In addition, manufacturing industry's need for this layer of semi-skilled workers led to other social changes. The migrant labour system was no longer appropriate. There was now a need for a more settled urban working class, and this began to slowly undermine the migrant labour system and the cheap labour system.

In other words, the growth of manufacturing led to the growth of the black working class in the 1960s, and it increased the size of the urban- based working class.

The growth of an urban-based working class

In order to serve the labour supply and other needs of various sections of capital i.e. manufacturing, agriculture and mining, the state developed a dual strategy. While serving an economy dominated by manufacturing, the state also had to ensure a supply of highly controlled cheap black labour to the agricultural and mining sectors of the economy. Influx control was intensified in order to ensure that black workers remained in the reserves in order to serve the labour supply interests of agriculture. Pass laws were applied to both black men and women.

Influx control ensured that a large pool of cheap black labour was available in the countryside for the mining sector. As part of the migrant labour system, black workers were recruited on 11-month contracts by various mining agencies. The fact that miners could not bring their families to the cities kept wages low for the mining houses.

On the other hand, manufacturing needed a semi-skilled and stable labour force. In order to meet the labour supply needs of manufacturing, the state ensured that workers needed for semi-skilled jobs received the minimum education. The state also had to ensure that cheap black labour was located close to factories, while manufacturing needed a stable workforce; black workers earned too little and were dependent on state housing. By 1949 a belt of about 200 000 squatters existed on the periphery of major cities. Research estimated that in the period between 1952 and 1960, 350 000 houses were required to deal with the housing backlog for Africans.

As a result of the shortage of houses and the labour supply needs of manufacturing, the Native Building Workers Act was passed in 1951. Based on this Act, African workers were recruited to construct houses for Africans in urban areas. Houses were sold on a hire-purchase system or rented. In some cases local authorities bought building materials in bulk and sold it to Africans for purposes of building houses. The state's National Building Research Institute encouraged blacks to build their own houses by providing building plans free of charge. During this period, many townships sprang up near industrial towns such as Germiston, Springs, Pretoria, East London, Durban, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and the Vaal Triangle. The increase in the number of residential areas in towns and cities laid the basis for working class resistance in the townships and the schools in 1976 and in the 1980s.

Bantu Education and the new needs of Capitalism

The growth of metal and engineering industries, which grew massively in the 1940s and 1950s, led to a demand for semi-skilled workers. This raised challenges for the education system in the country.

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 removed the schooling of blacks from the churches and put it under state control. The apartheid state developed an education system whose aim was to ensure that an African workforce was given education to enable it to conduct low-skilled work, and also semi-skilled work for the manufacturing sector. This labour force, among other things, was taught literacy and numeracy. As a result basic education (primary school) enrollment increased from 1 million in 1955 to 2.5 million in 1969.

In 1975, on the eve of the 1976 uprising the African student population in primary and secondary schools was 3 378 900 and 318 500 respectively. African student enrollment numbers increased significantly in the 1970s and 1980s.

African students in primary and secondary schools

(Rounded off to the nearest 100)

Year	Primary School	Secondary School
1953	852 000	30 700
1955	970 200	35 000
1960	1 452 300	47 600
1965	1 833 000	65 000
1970	2 615 400	122 500
1975	3 378 900	318 500
1980	4 063 900	774 000
1985	4 820 100	1 192 900
1988	5 365 500	1 662 000

Source: SACHED 1991

The table above shows that the student enrollment amongst Africans increased as a result of the introduction of the Bantu Education Act in 1953.

The table below demonstrates an increase in black (African, Coloured and Indian) student enrollment in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

Black school enrollment

Year	African Students	"Coloured" Students	"Indian" Students
1970	2 738 564	490,351	161,676
1972	3 081 162	534 613	172 142
1974	4 488 043	591 850	180 800
1976	3 900 454	655 347	188 008
1978	4 311 616	722 326	205 136
1980	4 839 806	748 896	217 170
1982	5 313 016	766 179	223 745
1984	5,795,711	773,543	229,686
1986	6 237 070	798 507	232 468
1988	7 218 972	832 329	223 910

Source: SACHED 1991

The increase in the number of black students in primary and secondary schools in the context of apartheid, and the lack of resources in black schools, laid the basis for the development of generalised student resistance in the 1970s and the 1980s.

Formation of "bush" Colleges

The Extension of the University Education Act of 1959

excluded black students from so-called white universities and allowed for the admission of black students to white universities on the condition of government approval. The only exceptions were the University of South Africa, which delivered courses through a correspondence system, and the University of Natal, which was permitted to run a "non European" medical school. The act mandated the formation of new universities, the University of Western Cape for so-called Coloureds; the University of Durban-Westville for so-called Indians; University of Zululand for Zulu-speaking students, the University of Turfloop for Sotho-speaking, Tswana-speaking, Venda-speaking, Pedi-speaking and Tsonga-speaking groups; and Fort Hare (formed before the introduction of the Act), admitted Xhosa-speaking students. Because of their inferior status, location and the quality of their education, these institutions were referred to as 'bush colleges'.

Racist, hierarchical and despotic regimes controlled these 'bush' colleges. Afrikaner administrators were appointed by the National Party (NP) regime to run the 'bush' colleges. All four 'bush colleges' were built in remote rural areas. The purpose of doing this was to avoid the interaction between students and the black working class in urban areas. Access to these campuses, curricula, library holdings and cultural life was strictly controlled and monitored. The university administrators attempted to incorporate and control elected Student Representative Councils (SRCs).

The primary purpose of the formation of these 'bush' colleges was to create a new breed of administrators, functionaries, intellectuals and political leaders who would serve the new apartheid order. This layer would occupy lower supervisory levels in industry, the bureaucracy of the new Bantustans, an intelligentsia that would defend and justify apartheid, and the political leadership structures of the Bantustans.

Contrary to the objectives of the apartheid regime, it was at these universities where some of the important student struggles took place in the 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s.

The Formation of SASO and the Radicalisation of NUSAS

The new wave of resistance to capitalism and apartheid was given a big boost with the rise of the Black Consciousness movement in the universities and schools. In July 1969, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), was formally launched at Turfloop University. SASO's emphasis of black consciousness, which argued, that black people needed to be their own liberators and be proud of being black, gained support among black university students. In 1968 black students broke away from the National Union of Students of South Africa (NUSAS), and formed SASO because they saw the need for black students to build their own organisation. SASO's ideology became a framework for students' resistance to white rule in universities and high schools in the 1970s. Black consciousness also found social and cultural expression among the black communities in urban areas.

A radical movement in arts and culture in the townships attempted to express black consciousness and black culture.

On the other hand, NUSAS was involved in struggles against racism and apartheid at the white universities in the late 1960s. But the significance of NUSAS in the early 1970s was its contribution towards the building of black unions. White NUSAS students and intellectuals, influenced by the radicalisation of black students in South Africa, and by the student uprisings in France (1968), set up Wages Commissions. In 1971 the Wages Commissions in Natal were initiated by a group of radical white academics and students at the University of Natal in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Among other things, the Wages Commission called meetings of black workers prior to the Wage Board determinations to formulate demands around wages and working conditions. As a result of these initiatives black workers formed a General Factory Workers Benefit Fund. At a Benefit Fund meeting, Alcan workers called for the formation of a trade union. This led to the first branch of the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU) in Natal.

International influences in the formation of the new student movement

The student uprisings and struggles that were led by SASO in the 1960s were also influenced by the general mood of international student protests in the 1960s. The local student movement was influenced by the independence movement in Africa, the events of May 1968 in France, the international anti-war movement that mobilised against the Vietnam War, and the civil rights movement in the United States of America.

International student struggles in 1968

In May 1968 a general strike broke out across France. It quickly began to reach near-revolutionary proportions before being finally suppressed by the government, which accused the communists of plotting against the Republic.

The movement began as a series of student strikes that broke out at a number of universities and high schools in Paris, following confrontations with university administrators and the police. The French President Charles de Gaulle's attempts to suppress the strikes by police action only inflamed the situation further. This led to street battles with the police, followed by a general strike of students and ten million French workers (about two-thirds of the French workforce). De Gaulle created a military operations headquarters to deal with the unrest, dissolved the National Assembly and called for new parliamentary elections for 23 June, 1968.

Before the uprisings of May 1968 in France, there were other important student uprisings in other parts of the world. On the last day of January 1968, the Polish government stopped a critical theatre production. The closure produced spontaneous street demonstrations

by Warsaw students, which were broken up by police. After a month of rising tension, in which the authorities responded to student and intellectual protests with abuse, threats and anti-Semitic leaflets, in March 1968 a mass meeting in Warsaw University was broken up by busloads of communist party-organised thugs. The March revolt led to the arrest of 1,200 students in Warsaw alone, and to the dismissals of the professors and lecturers who had supported them. In their leaflets and programme papers, the students insisted on their loyalty to socialism.

After the May 1968 uprisings in France, student protests in other countries followed. On the 20th of August 1968, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia to crush popular attempts to democratise socialism. Students in many parts of Czechoslovakia took part in the resistance to the Soviet Union's Occupation forces. Slogans like "Socialism Yes; Occupation No" were painted on the walls in various cities. By September 72 Czechoslovakians had been killed and over 700 wounded.

In Mexico, anti-government protests reached unprecedented proportions. From July to October 1968, academic life in the city and throughout Mexico was halted as students rioted. The anti-government demonstrations were ignited by student grievances, but many discontented sectors of society joined the students. The students' demands included freedom for all political prisoners, dismissal of the police chief, disbanding of the anti-riot police, guarantees of university autonomy, and the repeal of the draconian laws. As student unrest became more militant, police violence increased and hundreds of students were killed in Tlatelolco, Mexico City on 2 October 1968.

The Anti-Vietnam War

It was not until the United States President, Johnson, began his massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam in 1965, that the Anti-War Movement found its roots and grew in strength. Words like "counter culture", "establishment", "nonviolence", "draft-dodger", "free love", "Kent State", and "Woodstock" were added to the American vocabulary. It was the beginning of the hippie generation, the sexual revolution and the drug culture. The country's youth, the ones dying in the war, began demanding answers to America's high profile presence in Vietnam. They wanted to know why peace talks were organised and continually failed. Many young people at college and university campuses all over the United States began to organise protests against the war. Student organisations like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) held rallies and marches, the first one happened in Washington in April 1965. Over the next 2 years the Anti-War Movement snowballed. Activists, celebrities and musicians like Abbie Hoffman, Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, Jane Fonda, Joan Baez, Jefferson Airplane, and countless others took up the anti-war cause and waved anti-war banners. Their speeches and their music reflected the anger and hopelessness that Americans felt over the

Vietnam War. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, during this period, also sparked racial tension and unrest.

The civil rights movement in the United States

As part of the generalised uprising against the Vietnam War and racism, black students in the United States of America (USA), became more radicalised in the 1960s. In August 1964 the bodies of three murdered members of the Students Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were discovered in Mississippi, USA. The SNCC, a radical student movement was formed in 1960, and was to become the most important student movement in the USA in the 1960s. Its tactics became a model for the student and the anti-war movement as a whole.

The SNCC gave birth to the concept of "black power" and the black power movement. Its activists gave birth to the idea of "black consciousness" and to the Black Panthers, an organization that radicalised the struggle for black freedom in the US.

The black consciousness movement of the United States influenced the black consciousness movement in South Africa. Local activists borrowed ideas from the radical literature of the black consciousness movement in the USA and reinterpreted and adapted these to the South African reality. The writings of many of the important writers of the movement in the US, like for example, Eldridge Cleaver, were read and discussed by local activists.

The events of 1968 influenced students and academics in South Africa. Some of the white students and academics were living, teaching and studying in Europe at that time. They then brought the influences of 1968 to universities in South Africa. Organisations like the University Christian Movement, which was active in the bush colleges, also brought back influences from international student movements.

The independence movement in Africa

Another important influence that shaped the emerging student movement in black schools and universities was the rise of the independence movements and their struggles in Africa. The 1960s was a period of generalised struggles for independence in Africa, beginning with the independence of Ghana in 1957, Algeria in 1961, followed by a number of other countries in Africa. In the Southern Africa region, the early 1970s saw the intensification of the armed struggle against Portuguese colonial rule in Mozambique and Angola, and against British settler rule in Zimbabwe. The writings of Frantz Fanon, active in the Algerian struggle for independence, were especially important. The ideas of "African Socialism" promoted by Julius Nyerere of Tanzania were also very influential, and radicalised the new generation of student activists.

Actual political developments in Africa, and the ideas of some of its leading activists, became an important influence in the formation of the new student movement in South Africa. In different ways and to a different extent, both the activists in SASO and in NUSAS were influenced by these developments in Africa.

Local student struggles which helped form the student movement

At the end of the 1960s students in South Africa waged a number of struggles, which included a demand for better living conditions and democratically elected Students Representative Councils (SRCs). In 1968 in Nongoma Vocational Training School, for example, students boycotted classes in support for their demand for decent food. The authorities responded by expelling five students. In the same year, the police arrested over 200 male students at Clarkebury Institution in Transkei. The students stoned the school buildings and damaged two cars at the school. The students' anger stemmed from complaints about food.

In 1968, on a national scale, students in black universities were engaged in struggles for democratic Student Representative Councils (SRCs). Students argued that democratically elected SRCs were the only bodies that could lead struggles for better conditions at the institutions of higher learning.

In April 1972 the SRC of Turfloop University elected Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro to speak at the graduation ceremony. In his speech Tiro attacked the discrimination against blacks and the control of universities by the apartheid government, and education in general, by whites. In the same month the all-white disciplinary committee expelled Onkgopotse Tiro. When a petition for his reinstatement was rejected, students began a sit-in in the main hall. The university authorities suspended the SRC, banned student activities on campus, and expelled 1 146 students. The police were called in to crush the uprising. By 6 May 1972 the campus was deserted and practically sealed off by the police.

Events at Turfloop University were followed by countrywide protests organised by SASO. Demonstrations at the universities of the Western Cape, Durban-Westville, Zululand, Fort Hare, the Johannesburg College of Education, ML Sultan Technikon and other institutions followed. The apartheid regime responded with repression and banned SASO leaders, including Steve Bantu Biko. In 1973, in Fort Hare, Turfloop, Western Cape and Bophuthatswana, SASO was banned. In 1974 a parcel bomb killed Onkgopotse Tiro in exile in Botswana.

The repression did not stop students from campaigning and highlighting the political issues facing the country and the Southern African region. At the beginning of 1974 SASO condemned the presence of the apartheid forces in Namibia. SASO reaffirmed the non-collaboration stance

of the black Consciousness Movement and condemned the Bantustan leaders.

In September 1974, a "pro-Frelimo" rally was held at Turfloop University despite the administration's refusal to grant permission for the rally. This was a celebration of Mozambique's independence and the defeat of Portuguese colonialism. After several encounters between the police and students, the university was closed. Subsequently SASO leaders were detained. In March 1975, the Deputy Minister of Bantu Education reported to Parliament that 103 former students of Turfloop were not readmitted. SASO argued that most of those students were its members.

In 1975, SASO held its annual conference under very difficult conditions, in Pietersburg. It was reported that there was only one member of the executive committee at the meeting. The rest of the executive members were either banned or arrested.

Besides universities, student struggles were also taking place at schools. The Minister of Justice and Police announced that 296 black students were arrested in 1972 as a result of uprisings in five black schools. They also alerted Parliament that the number of arrests would increase in 1973. It was reported that a number of black schools were engaged in demonstrations.

In January 1972 the South African Student Movement (SASM) was launched out of various groups working in black high schools. The Soweto based African Student Movement (ASM) was instrumental in the formation of SASM. SASM used various methods of organising black high school students such as concerts, cultural activities and debating societies. SASM had strong links to SASO. SASM became instrumental in the mobilisation of 16 June 1976. Like SASO, SASM was banned in 1977.

White students in universities were also involved in a number of struggles. In December 1968 NUSAS announced its protest action and demonstrations. The action was to start at the beginning of 1969 and was aimed at stopping the state-led harassment of NUSAS and its leaders.

In 1969 students at the English-medium universities and colleges held placard demonstrations, public meetings and other forms of mass demonstrations. Students were protesting against the tenth anniversary of the "Extension of the University Education Act", in terms of which the previous open universities were closed to so-called "non-whites" unless they received special Ministerial approval. Students linked their protest with the "France 1968" students' movement.

NUSAS was also under attack from the state. Its activists and supporters were arrested and often beaten up by the police. The state made it clear that it would crush the organisation. A Commission of Inquiry into NUSAS was

launched by the state where witnesses were subpoenaed. The interim report from the commission that investigated NUSAS was published in 1973. Subsequently, five of the NUSAS leaders were banned. In the context of generalized arrests NUSAS launched a "Release all Political Prisoners" campaign in 1974.

Workers' Struggles on the Eve of June 16 1976

There were a number of isolated and low profile workers' struggles in the 1960s. After the years of repression in the early to mid 1960s, workers' struggles began to revive at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. A number of initiatives to organise black workers were undertaken by various individuals and political currents. The Black Consciousness Movement made a number of attempts to organise black workers, leading to the formation of the Black and Allied Workers Union in 1972. White student activists from NUSAS formed Wages Commissions in 1971, and began a process of organizing black workers. In addition to these and other initiatives to organise black workers, the workers themselves began to engage in industrial action and strikes. In 1971 thousands of contract workers in Namibia, then a colony of South Africa, went on strike over wages and working conditions. In the same year, workers at the docks in Cape Town and Durban also went on strike. In Johannesburg bus drivers went on strike and this resulted in the formation of the Transport and Allied Workers Union. But probably the most important workers' struggle in this period, whose energy fed into the emerging student movement, was the Durban Strikes of 1973.

The 1973 Durban strike wave started when 2 000 African workers at the Coronation Brick and Tile Company in the northern outer edge of Durban went on strike on the morning of the 9th of January 1973. The strikes spread to other parts of Durban and throughout the country. It is estimated that about 300 strikes, in which 80 000 workers participated, occurred between 1973 and 1974.

During that period there were a number of revolts in the mines. At least 152 miners were killed and 152 injured. SASO condemned the violence and the killing of black miners. Protest meetings were organised at the University of Durban-Westville. Turfloop students dismissed their SRC for not organising a protest meeting. Students at white universities also organised protests and marched to the Head Office of Anglo American Corporation, a multinational mining company. There was confrontation with the police during the protest action.

The SASO and BCP Trials in 1975

In an attempt to crush black people's resistance, a number of trials were held in 1975. The biggest and the longest trial was that of SASO and the Black People's Convention (BPC) leaders. The leaders of the Black Consciousness Movement were accused of fuelling anti-white feelings among blacks and the preparing for the violent overthrow of the government. After two years, they were acquitted on the main charges but found guilty on minor charges. This led to them being sentenced to five to six years in prison. The trial was a major blow to the BC movement because its key leaders were imprisoned on Robben Island.

