

The South African National Student Uprising of 1976: Looking Back 40 Years Later

Lessons from the struggle to eradicate apartheid and settler colonialism

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On June 16, 1976, students in the Southwest Townships (Soweto) outside of Johannesburg stayed away from school in protest against the Bantu education system which was enacted by the racist apartheid government beginning in the early 1950s.

The Bantu Education Act of 1953, which was drafted by H.F. Verwoerd, who later became prime minister in the 1960s, had also met protests from the African population. These demonstrations during the 1950s were eventually crushed by the security forces of the settler colonial regime.

Bantu education was designed for Africans with the expressed intent to convey through this methodology that equality with whites was not to be pursued by the majority population. One unintentional consequence of the Bantu Education Act was to increase enrollment of Africans within the school system and therefore providing a base for the expression of mass discontent with the overall system of racist oppression.

In 1976, the Nationalist Party government declared that educational instruction would be conducted in both English and Afrikaans languages, the tongue of the dominant oppressors inside the country. Students who had already been undergoing a radicalization process for several years decided to take action in opposition to not only the language policy but to the overall deplorable system of education in general.

The march on June 16 was reportedly called by the Action Committee of the Soweto Students Representative Council and initially involved two high schools, Naledi High in Naledi and Morris Isaacson in Mofolo. Nonetheless, other accounts contend that the main focus of activity was Phefeni Junior Secondary, located near Vilakazi Street in Orlando. (sahistory.org.za)

Phefeni was close to the railway station where many students got off the trains to join the demonstration. The plan was set up where the students from Naledi High were to march from this direction and later mobilize students from the schools on the way toward Morris Isaacson.

Students from Morris Isaacson were to march from their school connecting with others until they arrived at a central location where they would continue in a disciplined manner collectively to Orlando Stadium. There were other schools that also participated in the manifestation bringing thousands of youth into the streets.

Police encountered the young people who were conducting their protest peacefully first by throwing teargas into the crowd and later firing live bullets striking at least four students initially. After the first massacre of students, people scattered enraged by the outrageous killing of youth.

Soon enough the West Rand Administrative Buildings (WRAB) and vehicles were set on fire and burned to the ground. Later a white WRAB bureaucrat was pulled from a car and beaten to death.

Stores selling alcoholic beverages were burned and looted. Other clashes with the police took place where dozens more students were murdered in the vicinity of the Regina Mhundi church in Orlando and the Esso garage in Chiawelo. When the students were halted and dispersed by the police in one locality they swiftly moved on to other areas.

By the conclusion of the first day of the uprising most of Soweto, including Diepkloof, which was relatively unaffected during the earlier hours, were impacted by the unrest. The apartheid authorities closed all schools early and many students headed towards home amid townships on fire.

Hundreds of people were killed in the days that followed as the demonstrations spread to Cape Town and other regions of the country. This protest extended across the country from the youth sector to the working class.

A Renewed Struggle

The outbreak of strikes and rebellion in 1976 provided the banned exiled national liberation movements an opportunity to recruit youth who were fleeing the country as well as those who remained inside South Africa.

African National Congress (ANC) leaders escalated their efforts to provide political and military training to a new generation of youthful militants. Several clashes between cadres of the ANC military wing Um Khonto we Sizwe (MK) were reported in the following months during 1976.

Both the ANC and its breakaway Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) experienced a boost in membership and affiliation. By 1980, the armed struggle had escalated where coal to fuel production facilities were bombed by the ANC on June 1. The attacks on SASOL I, NATREF and SASOL II took place in order to coincide with the apartheid Republic Day.

A new generation of resistance took hold leading to the mass upsurge of the 1980s involving the formation of unions, civic organizations, a cultural revival, and a more consistent armed struggle leading to the demise of the racist system by 1994.

The racist apartheid regime attempted to ruthlessly suppress the national liberation struggle through mass incarceration, targeted assassinations, massacres of protesters and strikers along with cross border raids into neighboring Frontline States accused of harboring MK guerrillas.

ANC offices and training camps in Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Botswana were raided and bombed by the South African Defense Forces (SADF). It is estimated that over one million died in the struggle to free South Africa and Namibia

including efforts to drive out the SADF from southern Angola during the late 1970s and 1980s.

The Republic of Cuba provided hundreds of thousands of volunteers in the fight to defeat the SADF in Angola. The Southwest Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) in Namibia also waged a heroic campaign between 1960 and 1989 leading to their independence in 1990.

Lessons From the South African Liberation Movement

Today some twenty-two years since the ascendancy of the ANC to power in South Africa the struggle is by no means over. Although advances have been made in the acquisition of political power; the construction of homes; providing water to township and rural residents; educational opportunities and medical care; the national wealth of South Africa has not been transferred to the African majority.

Legitimate grievances remain and they are reflected in the ongoing unrest among the African working class and urban residents. Nonetheless, the United States government, which reaped tremendous benefits from corporate investments in the apartheid system is still seeking to undermine the ANC government.

The ANC is facing formidable challenges in the local governmental elections scheduled for August. The country is undergoing an economic crisis with the decline in the value of the national currency, the rand, and rising unemployment rates fueled by capital flight carried out by the mining firms and financial institutions.

What lessons can youth in the U.S. and other western states learn from these struggles for the 21st century? Like the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the South African Revolution was based upon both national and class oppression.

In the U.S., African Americans and Latina/os are subjected to higher rates of joblessness, poverty, police repression and mass incarceration. Linking the plight of the youth with that of the working class was a fundamental strategic aspect of the movement to liberate Southern Africa as a whole.

The U.S. is undergoing a national election in 2016 where the issues related to the social conditions involving the oppressed are not seriously discussed. This reality suggests the need for independent self-organization within a similar framework as the ANC and its allies within the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

These lessons from the national student uprising of 1976 and the subsequent struggle encompassing the working class and peasantry should be seriously considered as a way forward for the realization of self-determination and social emancipation in the U.S. As in both South Africa and the U.S., the capitalist relations of production must be overturned in order for genuine liberation and social justice to become a reality.

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