

national union of south african students
nasionale unie van suid-afrikaanse studente

NUSAS

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DI/JF

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To:

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National Executive
SRC Presidents
Student Editors
Overseas National Unions
Overseas Representatives
International Organisations

Dear Sir/Madam

Demonstration at Turfloop

Trouble has once again flared up on the tribal college campuses, this time at the University College of the North (Turfloop). The University College has just been granted full university status by legislation which has been passed through Parliament, although it was opposed by the Opposition. This is the second time that students at tribal colleges have voiced their dissatisfaction in the last few months, the last effort being made by students at Fort Hare last year, who conducted a sit-down demonstration in protest against their Rector's treatment of certain students.

Events

On Tuesday May 6, a student body meeting was held at Turfloop, which was attended by over 500 out of the 630 students at the University College. At this meeting, the students voiced their objections to the manner in which they had been treated by their Senate. The students claimed they were being treated like children, and that the College was considering the Students' Representative Council as an "opposition party". During the meeting, students condemned the way they were being treated at the College, and speaker after speaker rose to voice his indignation.

The specific grievances were mentioned by the students and outlined in the Resolution. These were: a) that after a student body had unanimously voted to affiliate to NUSAS, the affiliation had been refused by the Senate. b) the students said they were unhappy because the College Senate had refused to allow delegates from Turfloop who had attended the last NUSAS Congress to read their reports to the students. c) the students were annoyed that the Turfloop Senate had refused them permission to support the protest held at Fort Hare last year. d) the students were annoyed that they do not have free access to the Press "so that the feelings of the SRC and the student body could be made known to the outside world". e) they were annoyed that two of their students had been suspended for the rest of the academic year, and although the SRC had pleaded with the Senate to relax the suspension, this request had been turned down, and no reasons for the suspensions were given. f) they alleged that they had wanted

the President of NUSAS, Mr Duncan Innes, and Professor John Blacking of the University of the Witwatersrand, to address them, but that the Senate had refused them permission to invite the two men to speak. Permission has, however, been granted to Nationalist speakers to speak on the campus.

The students noted their "regret and shock and resentment" at the Senate's refusal to consider any of their representation. They demanded better co-operation between the SRC and the Senate, requested the Senate to let two Executive members of the SRC sit in on all discussions of matters involving students' interests.

Demonstration

Following the adoption of this resolution, which was carried unanimously by the student body at the meeting, the next day at 10 am, the students gathered on the campus and over 400 of them marched onto the Rector's office. Many of them carried posters, which had such slogans as: "We demand answers to our resolutions" and "Uhuru of the mind - yes". The students marched up to the office of the Rector, whereupon the SRC President, Mr Petrus Machaka, went into the Rector's office to hand in the resolution. The Rector, Professor F G Engelbracht, received the resolution, and while he was reading it, the protesting students marched past the Administration Block, after having stood in silence for five minutes. The students then returned to their lectures.

Subsequent Events

The Rector of the University College issued a statement immediately after the demonstrations, in which he said:

"I do not know of any event which could have given rise to discontent among students.

"I have been acting Rector since the beginning of this year, only, so that it is difficult for me to know the history of student grievances.

"In view of the critical attitude of students, and the fact that I, as Acting Rector, am not responsible for their discontent, I felt it would be wiser not to comment further at this stage."

In a statement issued at the same time, the President of NUSAS, Mr Duncan Innes, said that the student demonstration at Turfloop had made a "glaring mockery" of the South African Government's claims that students at the tribal colleges were happy with conditions there.

"Not many months ago, Fort Hare students declared their dissatisfaction with conditions at their College. Now Turfloop students have done the same. These tribal colleges are a disgrace to the name of education in South Africa, and no amount of distortion can smother this fact.

I have tremendous admiration for the courage of these students as I realise the risks that they are taking by voicing their opinions. Should their authorities or the Government wish to take any sort of reprisals against them, as occurred at Fort Hare, last year, I want to assure them that NUSAS stands firmly with them, and will defend their cause."

Further Reactions

In a second statement issued over the weekend, the President of NUSAS said:

"NUSAS regards the struggles at Turfloop as our struggle. We realise the risks these students run in seeking affiliation to NUSAS, and I want to assure them of our fullest support for their actions. I will do all I can to ensure that their affiliation to NUSAS will be allowed."

Mr Innes met the President of the SRC at Wits and of the SRC at Rhodes, and with the SRC President, Vice-President and Secretary at UCT. The reaction from all these bodies was one of sympathy and support for the students at Turfloop.

In a statement to the Press, Mr Mark Orkin, President of the Wits SRC, summed up the feeling of most SRCs:

"We fully support the demands and actions of the students of Turfloop. We join their challenge to the Rector and the Senate: "Allow your students the freedom to govern their own affairs responsibly and creatively. Let them invite their own speakers onto the campus without veto, and voice their views. Respect their democratic decision to affiliate to NUSAS." Until at least these demands are met, this university-to-be remains a college in the bush, and yet another facet of apartheid is given the lie. Strong majority indications of student grievances at two such institutions in half a year - Fort Hare and Turfloop - give a very different picture from the one sketched in Parliament. The closed universities, Black and White, must be opened for all. Our country is diverse, its future non-racial. The Prime Minister has left the problems of that future to the youth - us. We want to seek the answers together."

Support was almost immediately forthcoming from the University Christian Movement Chairman at Wits, Mr Charles Simkins, who issued the following statement:

"We are most concerned about the situation at Turfloop. While it is repeatedly claimed that students there are gaining a Christian education, an atmosphere of constant fear and distrust exists. 'Awkward questions' asked either in the lecture halls or outside of them are actively discouraged."

Mr Simkins went on to say that the only religious services allowed on the campus were "Dutch Reformed Church-style". Ministers of other denominations, he continued, were sometimes allowed to lead these general services, but Catholic priests, for example, were excluded.

"Against this sort of background I believe that this week's student demonstration at Turfloop was both necessary and constructive."