

# Stealing youths from the working class

Some people want us to believe that Youth is a group or class separate from the two main classes in capitalist society, workers and capitalists. This is false. It is convenient for the dominant class to confuse things in this way, because it helps to distract working class youths from their real problems.

It cannot be accepted that Youth is classless. Youths belong either to the working class or to the capitalist class (or to the 'middle-class', which lies between the other two). The problems faced by working class youths are the same as those experienced by their parents, namely how to escape from or cope with poverty, unemployment, bad education, bad housing, ghettos, oppression etc. Adults try to handle these problems through working class institutions like trade unions, stokvels, mohodisano, burial societies and so on; while youths, who have not yet fully entered the routine of work and marriage, have different ways of coping, as we will describe later in this article. It is at the stage before

youths become conscious of themselves as workers, that there is an attempt to organise them into Youth Clubs or Centres. This Youth Strategy, developed by the dominant class, is intended to separate youths from their parent class, so that they may be organised, disciplined, tamed and taught to have middle class values and attitudes.

The dominant class is quite conscious of the trouble that can be caused by working class youths when they are not under some kind of control. The following remarks were made in the report of a Commission that investigated certain so-called riots that took place in 1949 in the Western locations of Johannesburg, Krugersdorp and Randfontein. What was happening there? In plain English, the location residents were enraged by continual police harassment and by steadily rising costs of transport etc, and there were demonstrations, which turned into stone-throwing and so on. The commissioners put blame on liquor, movies, communists and youths.



*Dies die ouens van way-back 50's*

They report:

*The location youths who on account of their education are not subject to any social bonds, lead idle lives. No wonder that most of them drift into gangs with an anti-social tendency.*

*These gangs, whose badge of office is narrowed trousers and who make use of a secret language code, roam about the Native areas defying all authority and creating a reign of terror.*

*They thrive on disorder and it is no wonder that they played such a prominent part in all the disturbances. . .*

Especially in very turbulent times, great attention is paid to 'getting youths off the streets', by which is meant, getting them under control, not leaving them to organise and make trouble for the system.

## A youth centre

Let's examine one such attempt, namely the youth centre called THUSONG, in Alexandra. This centre is especially interesting, in that its founders are quite explicit about its aims; and also because it is so obviously financed by Big Business, and directed by members of the dominant class.

Thusong was established in order to soften the blows of the system aimed at the working class. This is of course not the way the founders of Thusong would put it. Their stated reasons for starting the centre are sociological. Research into conditions in Alexandra showed that there was overcrowding, gambling, alcoholism, insufficient recreation, a high drop-out rate at local schools. What they did not discover (or at least they do not mention it) is the exploitation of workers by the capitalist class, which produces the bad conditions mentioned. The founders of Thusong have adopted the conventional Liberal approach of trying to make bad conditions bearable, without understanding or perhaps wishing to alter, basic causes.

Actually they could not admit exploitation, seeing that Thusong has been es-

established and developed by the finance gained in the course of such exploitation. Out of their immense profits capitalists donate money, in the form of charity, for a youth club which will help hide the realities of class domination and exploitation, and even to some extent win the gratitude and the consent of workers. By gaining such consent, the dominant class secures its domination, and thus continues to extract surplus value from the working class.

## Sponsors

The force behind Thusong is the SANDTON CIVIC FOUNDATION, which gets its money mainly from Big Business, and is basically responsible to these donors. Whatever the Foundation does must therefore in some way be suitable to the capitalist class. The Foundation is a class instrument.

## Thusong e thusa mang?

Influence in Thusong is carried out culturally. The activities offered are distractions from the real problems and needs of working class youths: traditional dramas and dance, modern ballet, tourism, making wire-cars, and a few rather feeble occupations like cooking and typing. As explained in another article, the hidden purpose of these kinds of activities is to prevent the formation of genuine working class values and actions. Youth Club members are more likely to develop into middle class people, or at least people with middle class attitudes, than to become working class spokesmen.

The founders of Thusong are quite conscious of its purpose. The chair-person explained in an interview:

We like to mould together a particular group, develop their maturity and responsibility, and hopefully send them out as leaders of the Alexandra community, to serve the community in various ways . . .

If we do develop young people in this way by broadening their horizons in offering them so many more opportunities than they would have in school or their home, I believe that we could show other urban areas that centres like Thusong are of vital necessity in a stable community . . .

The 'stable community' that is favoured, is of course still the ghetto community of separate black locations; the only difference being that they will not rebel, destroy capital, strike, fire buses and buildings and threaten revolution.

## Repetition

It seems that whenever events compel reformers to notice the working class, they think of Youth Centres. An exactly similar thing to Thusong was being thought out in the 1940's, another time of turbulence in urban townships. A certain ET Grieveson wrote in a letter, dated about 1945:

*It seems that Alexandra is rather in the public eye at present. I don't know whether this means that any improvement schemes will actually be launched or come to anything . . . but I believe that there is today among Alexandra people a greater readiness to respond to a lead and co-operate than there was two or three years ago; though I don't think they are any more capable of taking the initiative themselves, and any lead given would have to be in a carefully considered direction.*

*I was naturally very interested in Dr Dexter Taylor's remarks about Boys' Clubs at the last Joint Council meeting, and think that his suggestion of trying to establish what might be called a whole-time club is a very sound one.*

*The scheme I should propose would be the establishment of a kind of Junior Social Centre, providing opportunities for a Boys' Club (preferably divided into junior and senior sections) a Roamer Crew, and a Pathfinder Troop. . . it would be more effective if means could be found for the provision of a special building for these activities. . . Then couldn't this be linked up with the general question of school overcrowding and unoccupied children by making it an overflow school!*

The way Thusong is managed is significant. There are all the customs of democracy, without any real democracy. Members elect a group of leaders who are called councillors, including a 'mayor' and 'deputy mayor'. The youths themselves chose this system, after they had visited Boys Town. This was a successful introduction of youths to the style of liberal democracy where domination is disguised beneath elections. There is abundant evidence that the

'mayor' wields real power, and is not obliged to work through mutual consultation and group decisions, which would be the case in real democracy.

Above this youth council there is a management committee, and several paid organisers, who get their salary direct from the Sandton Civic Foundation. This management committee also adopts the style of democracy, with votes, minutes, and so on.

But it is quite clear that there is no real power in this committee, since it does not have a final say over the spending of money. Finance is controlled by a separate committee, which guards the interests of those organisations that donate funds.

## Radichelete slaan die snaar

Without money, no Thusong; and the allocation of the budget is firmly in the control of this small, elite committee. While things go smoothly, the money is available; but should any serious difference of policy arise between members of Thusong and the founders, one need have no doubt that the money supply would dry up.

Democracy is possibly only where the mass of people themselves control their finance, and where decisions are really taken by groups in consensus, not by leader/masters.

## Struggles

There have been struggles between the members and the founders of Thusong. One difficulty is the question of administrative personnel. Since the members do not themselves elect their director/organiser, he might be a person they do not accept, and who they feel has been imposed on them. To the founders, however, it must seem necessary for them to maintain control through people they themselves have chosen to 'direct' youths at the centres.

Another difficulty has been 'politics'. The Foundation insists that there should be no politics at Thusong, while some adult members regard politics as being an inescapable part of their lives. The two sides compromised — by restricting politics to poetry readings, which on the one hand have clearly been political, since 1976, but on the other hand, could be seen as merely 'cultural'.



*Engaging in wars and dances for no good reason*

## Cultural imperialism

Many people in the townships are familiar with youth clubs and the 'good work' which they do in keeping children and the youth away from the streets.

All social institutions are set up for furthering the aims and ideology of one or other section of the community. We shall use this space to examine youth clubs and the kinds of activities they offer, as well as where they belong in terms of the different facets constituting a 'community'.

Firstly most youth clubs operate under one or other umbrella body. These umbrella bodies play important financing and controlling functions. The majority of youth clubs in Soweto are controlled and financed by WRAB. Youth clubs not falling under this category are mostly affiliates of the SOUTH AFRICAN ASSOCIATION OF YOUTH CLUBS. Though the Association has a lot of influence in determining the activities of the clubs, youth clubs can, and do, appeal to wealthier organisations for financial support. Money is a strong tool with which the financing class dominates classes in need. The wealthy organizations do not just part with their money — they only do so when they are sure that their money is put to 'good use'.

Some organizations such as the Group Chairman's fund of Anglo American, and Mobil, claim to give donations to community organisations without any strings attached. But before these organisations give out any money they make a serious study of the constitution of the youth club appealing for funds. They will then give out money on the basis of what the constitution says about the club. Clearly if they are faced with a constitution that challenges their interests they will not offer any support. Some big business funders (Mobil for example) will go to the trouble of 'assisting' in drawing up a constitution. Because Youth clubs need venues (rent), electricity, equipment, etc, they would find it impossible to operate without anyone funding them. They therefore comply with the expectations of their funders by structuring their programme so that their activities do not embarrass their funders. Instead of making youth clubs centres for children of the working class parents (by undertaking activities that will enable youths to understand their position as working class young people, and prepare them for challenging the system), youth clubs undertake neutral activities such as ballroom dancing, gumboot dancing, sports, and so on. All these activities will satisfy the funders and in no way question their position.

It is obvious in this regard that youth clubs operating under the auspices of WRAB or the community councils, whatever they do, are always subject to their superior's sanction. This is done more directly through the employees of

WRAB (employed as full time youth leaders).

Though there may occur friction between the superiors and the subordinates, the superiors always wield power and their word is final.

As suggested above, it is not only where the money comes from that will determine the class direction an organisation takes. The activities undertaken by the organization have a great influence and effect on the participants. We shall take a close look at some of the youth club activities.

## Ballroom dancing

This activity is foreign to the culture of the townships. It is therefore useful as part of capital's strategy of undermining the culture of the working class. Middle class activities such as this are introduced to make the workers doubt their own culture. Ballroom dancing in youth clubs also depends on competitions to exist. With competition arises lots of hostility among competitors. If there is not hostility there is no competitive spirit. This is a kind of empty hostility based on no genuine human feelings but only necessary to create this 'spirit'. Within this activity, based on partnership (male and female) there arises among participants a certain kind of



unreal relationship. The language used determines this relationship. Men are referred to as 'gentlemen' and women as 'ladies'. The terminology suggests that dancers are noble. These people are also affected by this terminology, and start trying to adjust to their titles, thereby trying to perceive themselves differently. They start to relate to one another differently too – they lead a life based on titles ie based on some vague middle-class title.

## Festivals

These activities are organised so that youth clubs may display their day to day activities. In most cases festivals and concerts are just a series of performances by youth club members. They display several activities – drama, dancing (several kinds) and music. Youth clubs operating under the auspices of the Association – Thusong in Alex being one of them – are discouraged from performing drama other than tribal dramas – that is, the children are discouraged from performing their experiences. Dramas based on tribal themes, as opposed to the living experiences of the youth, are useful to capital in that they are neutral about the issues of the present. "They do not provoke young children to become tsotsis or anything disgusting like that". On the other hand these tribal dramas fail to approach any historical events seriously. They merely conform to the stereotype of tribal/traditional plays – they present no useful or new way to approach history. They make tribal history feeble and reduce it to a series of events involving drunk chiefs and their indunas engaging in wars and dances for no good reason.

## Working-class culture

Members of a Youth Centre do not themselves usually invent their activities. These are already structured. Ballroom dancing is performed in a fashion created long ago, somewhere else, overseas perhaps. You don't make up the waltz, you learn to obey its rule. Even the kind of dramas put on by youth clubs have a prescribed formula: so that at drama festivals you will see the same thing time and time again – tribal nonsense. Scenes of life on a township street are actually forbidden.

It is quite different with activities that are invented by working class youths themselves, uninterfered with by authorities or middle-class misleaders. In this case it is youth themselves who produce their own culture, which, if they are working-class youths, is also working-class culture. In this section of the article we intend to discuss certain youth groups that are well known in black townships.

### A re yeng mapantsuleng

What sense can be made of Pantsula activity and style? It is not very useful to take the view that these youths are merely gangsters and loafers. Even if it were true that many Pantsulas really are tough and aggressive, this is only one characteristic, and it is not shared by all youths who might call themselves Pantsulas.

### Clash van die jewish

Let's examine their style of clothing. They go for trousers that seem deliberately shapeless – I refer to those called voops – which don't fit under the crotch, they are loose around the waist, so that the belt hangs down as if the buckle were too heavy; then the trouser legs are rolled up, or they have turn-ups (ash-trays) that flop over the shoes, and seem to scrape in the dust and get

caught under the heel. A majita wearing these pants looks like he has stolen them from some big fellow on the golf course. In actual fact, he did not steal them, but paid a lot of money for them, and he keeps them dry-cleaned and perfectly pressed. He may look untidy, but he definitely is not. It's the same with his shirt: even if it is a Christian Dior costing sixty, he will wear it with the sleeves too long, or an end hanging out of his trousers. He's trying to prove something. Shoes the same. If he wears takkies, they will be untied and the tongues are lolling out like two tired dogs – really untidy. But on the other hand those takkies are clean, clean, clean. He takes a lot of care.

## Contrasts

In these contrasts (contradictions) we can read messages about the conditions of life in an urban ghetto. The Pantsula does not disguise his origins. His style borrows openly from the style of the tsotsi, whose second hand trousers and shirt have, generation after generation, covered a hungry frame and an Okapi.

Now this very Bra Boy-Boy whose clothes seem shapeless, and he himself seems lazy, in fact holds himself highly alert. He is manotcha, wakker. "Hy kyk en blaai, dinner en dinner, jare en jare, tot die laaste dag." He sees to it that he remains wide awake, and not a moegoe. Under his clothes that don't fit, the Pantsula is tense and ready. Hy's fluks.

But these symbols of the tsotsi are only half the style: the other half shows extravagance and ambition. Pantsula's clothes are not cast-off, but new, expensive, clean and fashionable; and they are worn as such. They shine. In this way these clothes are not just things to wear; they are messages revealing the complex lives of youths who accept that they belong "by die lokasie", but don't conform to it. They admit that they are oppressed, but they declare their freedom. Their style of dress combines oppression and ambition, shapelessness and style, the ghetto and their mockery of the ghetto. Pantsula style is a statement of working class life in South Africa. In fusing contradictions it tries to be in some way a solution to working class problems.