

NUSAS AND STUDENT UNITY

By LIONEL FORMAN

WITHIN the next few months a student meeting is to take place in Johannesburg which may have important consequences for the whole South African democratic youth movement.

At the recent Assembly of the National Union of South African Students the offer was made by the delegates of the University of Natal (Non-European) and the Bantu Normal College to sponsor a "Unity Meeting" between representatives of the Non-European centres which have disaffiliated from NUSAS — Fort Hare, U.N. (N.E.) and Hewat Training College — and the NUSAS Executive to discuss, in the words of the Bantu Normal College delegate "the changes NUSAS will have to make if it is to be true national union, representative of Non-European as well as European students."

Over the past year there has been confusion and a certain amount of disagreement in the democratic camp on the correct attitude to NUSAS. Some have continued to take a leading part in NUSAS activities; some have rejected the organisation as a waste of time; and some, even, have declared it a harmful organisation which should be opposed.

The forthcoming meeting makes it more essential than ever for democrats to enter into a full discussion of the issues involved, so that a clear and united stand can be made.

This article aims at assisting such discussion by outlining the main facts and arguments at issue.

NUSAS was formed in the 1920's led by Leo Marquard, today a leading liberal. Like almost every other European organisation it seemed only vaguely aware of the existence of Non-Europeans and no attempt was made to affiliate Non-European students. At first NUSAS was representative of all students but the Nats. were soon at work and the Afrikaans-speaking centres broke away to form the fiercely racialistic Afrikaanse Studentebond.

The war brought a seven-year break in NUSAS activities, and when it was re-born in 1945 it took the step which transformed its character and turned it into one of the pet hates of the Nationalists. It invited the Non-European Fort Hare University to affiliate.

This led, from 1945 to 1952, to a sharp running battle inside NUSAS, as democrats forced the always hesitant leadership stage by stage into a more uncompromising stand against apartheid. Until 1952 the democrats won every major battle.

The First Big Battle

The first big battle was over social segregation. In 1946 the Mayor of Cape Town invited NUSAS delegates to a colour-bar reception. Democrats boycotted the reception, organised their own rival non colour-bar party. As a result of the determined campaign NUSAS resolved that in future no NUSAS function could have a colour-bar—that in its own affairs NUSAS would tolerate neither academic nor social colour-bar. Cape Town promptly disaffiliated in protest. But to the amazement of the Cape Town leaders the students of their university voted overwhelmingly for the NUSAS decision and reaffiliation.

Then NUSAS, at the insistence of the democrats went on record as supporting the principle of the extension of academic non-segregation at all universities. This caused a major furore for some time. This time it was the turn of Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Rhodes to disaffiliate. But once more NUSAS survived the shock and rather than be isolated the disaffiliates returned.

Next victory came shortly after the passing of the Suppression of Communism Act, when in the teeth of bitter executive opposition a named student was elected to the Executive of eight members. A year later, the first Non-European, N. G. Moodley of Natal University (Non-European) was elected to the Executive.

In 1951 one of the bitterest conflicts began when there was a strong move for disaffiliation from the International Union of Students which has the backing of democratic students all over the world. By a narrow margin the progressives won the day.

Further, in the teeth of bitter executive opposition a resolution in support of peace was carried — a bold step indeed in the heat of the cold war of 1951.

Then came the Defiance Campaign and the face of South Africa changed.

Until the Defiance Campaign Fort Hare and the other Non-European centres in NUSAS had been content with what NUSAS offered. But with the great upsurge of the liberatory movement NUSAS was seen to be blissfully unaware of the struggle for freedom, and all absorbed in the affairs of students “as such.”

The last straw came when NUSAS finally succumbed to world hysteria and disaffiliated from what it described as the “communist-dominated” International Union of Students.

In quick succession Fort Hare, UN(NE) and Hewat left NUSAS.

There was an enthusiastic, but shortlived effort to set up a new union — the South African Union of Democratic Students — but the difficulties were too great and SAUDS did not flourish.

This then was the background to the NUSAS Assembly which took place in Grahamstown this July.

The Main Decisions

These were the main decisions:

The acceptance of a compromise form of associate membership with the I.U.S. involving participation in its practical activities but dissociation from "political" decisions — with co-operation with the rival U.S. financed splitters international on the same basis.

Unanimous decisions to ask the A.N.C. among other organisations for assistance in the struggle against government interference and the imposition of apartheid at the universities, and to participate in the opposition to the Western Areas Removal Scheme.

The acceptance of the offer by Bulgaria of scholarships for African students. (It is to be hoped that suitable candidates will apply for these as soon as possible).

The election of a progressive executive including an African for the first time in NUSAS history.

The unanimous acceptance of the proposal for the Executive to meet with the disaffiliated centres to discuss with them the inadequacies of NUSAS.

A glance at these decisions reveals the importance of democratic student unity to ensure that something worth-while comes of them.

In the international sphere, experience has shown that no matter how strong may be the Assembly decisions for co-operation, the implementation of the decision depends entirely on the inclinations of the Executive. And strong student pressure on the present executive is the only means of ensuring that the maximum benefit is derived from our relations with the International Union of Students — to receive the widest distribution of the excellent IUS publications, to participate in its efforts for world peace and its work for an end to colonialism and oppression.

Nationally, the decision to work together with the liberatory organisations in defence of university freedom can be made to lead to a deeper understanding among students of the nature of the struggle for democracy.

Clearly also, the question of higher education will figure in the Freedom Charter and there is absolutely no reason therefore why NUSAS should not participate in the Congress of the People and its preparation.

Democratic Student Unity

Student unity is required, but the most glaring fact that the NUSAS Assembly revealed is that this democratic student unity is lacking. There exists a sharp difference of opinion on whether or not democratic students should work in NUSAS at all. And more startling than the existence of differences of opinion is the fact that democratic students have never yet taken the trouble to get together in an organised way and argue them out. If there is one lesson to be learned from experience it is the urgent need for all progressives to be united on the stand they take, whatever the stand may be.

Before the meeting between the disaffiliated centres and the NUSAS Executive takes place it is essential that progressives should have completed the fullest discussion of the problems involved so that there shall be no division and confusion, but a clear and united stand-point.

What should that stand-point be?

The essential point has already been made by the delegate of UN. (N.E.) at the Assembly. He stressed that while NUSAS may be serving the needs of European students in dealing with university matters only, it is completely failing in its duty to Non-European students. For the latter the essence of their needs as students is not confined to the university but is part of the whole struggle for human rights. The absence of these rights cuts off any possibility of university education for the majority of Non-Europeans, and makes the whole period of studentship of those who do reach the universities one of harassment and uncertainty.

The delegate of the Bantu Normal College put it quite simply. "If the Bantu Education Act succeeds there will no longer be any problem — no African will be able to qualify for the university."

The essential, then, before democrats can offer wholehearted support for NUSAS activities is that it should adjust its sights so that it no longer sees things with a purely "European" approach, but takes proper cognisance of the needs of its Non-European members. NUSAS has already — albeit hesitantly — shown its willingness to recognise this necessity.

Congress of the People

The real test — and the testing-time will coincide roughly with the meeting at Wits — will be NUSAS willingness to participate in

the Congress of the People. THIS SHOULD BE THE CENTRAL DEMAND OF THE DISAFFILIATED CENTRES AND OF ALL DEMOCRATS.

If this proposition is agreed to, then a new urgent need arises. And that is to ensure, firstly, the widest student support for the Congress, and secondly, the full participation of the disaffiliated centres in the meeting with NUSAS.

The latter point is stressed because the above-mentioned circumstances under which NUSAS would become an organisation which democrats can wholeheartedly support will not arise by a miracle. They will only come about if every democrat pulls his full weight to ensure their fruition. Certainly NUSAS will not follow such a policy if the militant students are not there to demand it.

It is difficult to see what arguments can be brought forward to justify a refusal to participate in the meeting. Certainly there is nothing to be lost.

The chief arguments which have been brought forward to support a refusal to have any dealings with NUSAS have been its European orientation, its break with the IUS, its refusal to take a general political stand outside the university sphere.

As long as NUSAS does not identify itself with the liberatory movement, any work in it is a waste of time, the argument has run.

It is, however, not a fact that every student who supports the policy of the Congresses is so taken up with direct work for them that he has absolutely no time for any other activity. It is essential for democrats to work on many fronts at once, and it is very doubtful if it is true that those students who are finding time to work in NUSAS as well are any less active in the work of the Congresses than those who have no time to waste on NUSAS.

And apart from this individual saving of energy there is nothing whatever to be gained by refusing to work in NUSAS.

The Value of NUSAS

Once it is understood clearly that by its very nature and composition it is not realistic to hope for NUSAS to become part of the liberatory movement, the more limited but nevertheless useful things which can be gained from membership, fall into perspective.

* Just as it is necessary for every worker to belong to and take an active part in his trade union, so it is useful for every student to take an active part in NUSAS. Student Unity in defence of their interests is, in itself, something desirable.

* Even if NUSAS is most hesitant to take any progressive step,

the influence of democrats in it has at least prevented it from allying itself with the reactionary forces. The one real barrier to the swamping of NUSAS by the fascist Afrikaner Studentebond is the absence of a colour-bar in NUSAS. If the Non-European students walk out — or even allow themselves to be forced out without a struggle — the way is open for the entire European student movement to be captured by the A.S.B. and converted into a powerful and active anti-democratic force.

- * NUSAS has proved to be an excellent platform for the putting of democratic ideas to students who would never otherwise have the opportunity of hearing them. And substantial numbers of students have been won over to active participation in the liberatory struggle.
- * While experience has shown the organisational and financial difficulties of organising a more militant national student federation, NUSAS serves a most valuable meeting place for democrats from all the universities, where they can exchange their views and co-ordinate activities at their own centres.
- * But most important, there is no doubt at all that NUSAS can be convinced of the need for participation — even though participation is limited — in the struggle for democracy. And who will argue that we should spurn allies in that struggle?

For all these reasons there seems little doubt that the correct policy to pursue is for the disaffiliated centres to attend the meeting and put forward a minimum essential policy for NUSAS — greater identification with the needs of Non-European students, manifested immediately by participation in the most urgent immediate activity of students — preparations for the Congress of the People. NUSAS could not justifiably refuse such a proposal.

Nor could democrats, once the proposal is accepted, refuse to work within NUSAS.

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THE WHEELBARROW

By RUTH MILLER

THE black man was bent almost double as he staggered down the street with the wheelbarrow. It was loaded with all his belongings, and the bed and mattress bulged, and the cane table on top slipped with every jerk of his feet. Pots and pans, blankets,