

Resurgence of debate around the academic boycott has been partly responsible for South African academics discussing the creation of a national organisation. But the greater impetus has been increasing political conflict on campuses, police invasions and detention without trial of staff and students.

An organ representing progressive academic staff is long overdue. Practically, it will enable academics to respond to student demands for solidarity action in a coherent, strategic and unified manner. It should further facilitate solidarity between staff and students who find themselves under political attack, locally and nationally.

University academic staff have staff associations, but these are more concerned with protecting members' statutory and material rights and do not present themselves as appropriate vehicles to represent their members politically. It is also doubtful whether the inert University Teachers Association of South Africa (UTASA) has the potential to emerge strongly enough to meet the challenges currently facing the universities.

A break with the past is necessary and the time is right for an independent yet overtly political national academic organisation to be formed. While progressive academics are in a strong ideological position on campus, their limited numbers leave them somewhat vulnerable. A political academic union would have an important role in defending members' political rights. It could facilitate confident and cohesive initiatives and campaigns, such as increasing links between community and campus. Such an organisation should not emerge merely in response to the pressure of the academic boycott. But if this pressure leads to constructive

internal responses, the boycott's value is clear.

## INVOLVING ACADEMICS IN STRUGGLE

There have already been significant changes on some campuses. At UCT the political crisis surrounding the first state of emergency was the catalyst for academic initiative. The resultant organisation was independent of the Academic Staff Association, and tried to involve staff, students and workers. Such initiatives need to be actively encouraged.

Such organisations will facilitate successful application of the selective boycott through contact with political organisations and trade unions to decide the fairest and most appropriate method of implementation. Of course mistakes will be made, but must be counted as part of the cost of attempting a more sophisticated position.

The burden of the boycott will fall on South African academics and students who wish to attend conferences and study abroad. But the same principle of selectivity must apply to foreign academics wishing to visit South Africa. Organisations representing academics overseas could meet with the external mission of the liberation movement, in consultation with internal progressive organisations, and so control the boycott from the outside.

The real value of a successful selective boycott will be to involve the academic world in struggles off campus. The universities have shown themselves to be an important site of struggle. Political organisations closely associated with wider struggles off campus now seems essential for taking that struggle further.

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