

TEACHERS IN COMMUNITY

The National Education Union of South Africa and Current Educational Issues:

A report on The 1983 Annual Conference

The third annual conference of the National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA) has confirmed that the organisation can play an important role in achieving unity among teachers in South Africa.

NEUSA regards 'South Africa' as the territory defined by the boundaries of the Republic as on 31st May 1961, and since NEUSA is committed to working towards a united, democratic country, teachers in the so-called 'homelands' are regarded by NEUSA as members of the South African teaching community. Furthermore, NEUSA's non-racialism — one of its more distinctive characteristics — means that it draws its membership from all education systems and has as its explicit aim the formation of a single, non-racial teacher organisation.

In its present position, NEUSA still maintains the policy of dual membership for teachers — teachers who belong to uni-racial organisations are eligible for NEUSA membership — but this is clearly an interim situation since the aim of NEUSA is the achievement of one education system for all in which considerations of language, community concerns and regional interests are acknowledged but not regarded as basic, organising principles.

Since its inception, NEUSA has developed from the goal of 'one education system now' — as a response to the education crisis of 1980 — to the position where it is presently working for the complete transformation of education in the context of a South African society restructured upon democratic and economically just bases. This commitment to both education and social change is not mere rhetoric, for NEUSA has developed working relationships with educational, community, worker and student organisations, relationships which have presently culminated in membership of the United Democratic Front.

The commitment to such a position leaves many questions still unanswered but it has resulted in a particular view of the role of teachers in the context of the continuing crisis in all sectors of South African education which cannot be explained nor resolved — as more and more teacher organisations are ready to acknowledge — in either purely or exclusively educational terms. Teachers are viewed by NEUSA as members of society, as people in communities who have contributions to make as citizens as well as the specific function as educators of the young and the unlearned. In his keynote address, Joe Phaahla (past president of AZASO and currently UDF executive member) said that in the campaign for justice and democracy in South Africa, teachers are in a unique position to challenge

the ideologies which the present education systems uphold. But teachers cannot have sufficient influence unless they organise themselves to this end and their organisation cannot in itself be adequate unless it is linked to a broad front of groups committed to the achievement of change in the whole of South African society.

Such an understanding of the situation has led to NEUSA's co-operation with AZASO and COSAS in the work of formulating an education charter for South Africa. Every stage of the De Lange Report's development has confirmed NEUSA's original conviction that that is no solution to the state of education here. The recently published White Paper on education confirms that the interests of the apartheid ideologues, the technocrats and those of the private sector (as the major sources of influence) are the only ones being taken into significant account. Thus reformist developments at constitutional and educational levels — which are very closely linked by current state policy — are vigorously opposed by NEUSA and by like-minded organisations. As an alternative, the working out of the process of arriving at an education charter is being undertaken by NEUSA in conjunction with other organisations. It must be noted that it is not the production of a document with fine-sounding sentiments that is aimed at: the process of discussing and articulating what could be the most appropriate form and system of education for this country is proceeding in many centres, drawing in a wide range of organisations and interests in the process of establishing representative and viable concerns expressed as intentions for an educational future in South Africa.

NEUSA is not the only teacher organisation which has expressed the intention of linking teachers in this country. JOCTASA has produced a 'charter for teacher unity' and it has consulted a number of teacher bodies on this question. NEUSA's response to these proposals is an expressed willingness to participate in a conference of teachers on this matter, but that there are many issues on which greater clarity is needed before agreement is likely. The stance towards the new constitution is one such issue, support for the UDF is another. NEUSA has always opposed a federal linking of teacher organisations, believing in the greater effectiveness and appropriateness of one, single, united teachers' organisation. But this stance has not precluded NEUSA's support for TASA's anti-SAIC campaign, for example, nor NEUSA's participation in the efforts to bring the bannings and the atrocities in the Ciskei to an end.

In addition to concern with policy positions such as those described above, the conference in Pietermaritzburg gave most of its time to the discussion and planning of activities of direct, practical concern to teachers. The development of subject workshops for teachers, linked to acutely needed resources centres drew the interest of most of the participants. It must be noted that support for teachers and students who are committed to non-racial attitudes and practice was expressed by the conference; and the nature of the subject workshops and resources centres, as they develop, will be determined by the focus upon material and techniques which will assist those teachers to overcome the difficulties of their present situations. In a similar sense, the continuing work of the teachers' advice bureaux is intended to provide teachers with the capacity to resolve many of their difficulties themselves, armed with information and in conjunction with other teachers. At the suggestion of Paddy Kearney — the other main speaker at the conference — a research group will collect accounts from teachers of their experiences in a variety of educational circumstances. A publisher has already expressed interest in such a collection. Other interest groups at this conference were on publications and adult education, two areas of concern which are specifically linked to NEUSA's interests. Although the topic was not given particular attention on this occasion, the question of education in the rural areas has been a continuing issue in the minds of NEUSA members, since 70% of the black schools are outside the towns and because so little is actually known of the situations of teachers, pupils and their parents in the country districts.

The declining quality of black education and the persistent unrest in educational institutions has given NEUSA reason to focus on these issues as part of its campaign for a just education system in a free and democratic South Africa, and hence the conference took a decision to support student organisations in their efforts to represent and organise students involved in the widespread dissent. NEUSA believes that it is imperative to reiterate the point that the hostility towards the present educational situation goes well beyond questions of facilities, the qualifications of teachers or comparability with other education systems. The recent outcry over the black matric results, as well as the parent and student anger at the high failure rates at all levels call the entire system, including the validity of the results, seriously into question. NEUSA has determined to persist in making doubts of this kind open and public.

The conference instructed the executive to ensure that students at all teacher-training institutions be informed about NEUSA and here co-operation with organisations like NUSAS and AZASO is paramount. Although students

at 'white' colleges and universities are encouraged or assisted by the administrations of such institutions to join the South African Teachers' Council for Whites (a practice which NEUSA finds impossible to reconcile with some of the stated attitudes towards education by many of those institutions) the recent White Paper on education makes clear that eventually all teachers will have to become members of a racially based teachers' council. NEUSA is opposed to the ethos and purpose of such a council and will continue to campaign against it.

The other question discussed at the conference was the expansion of NEUSA, particularly the establishment of new branches and the enrolment of teachers in large numbers. NEUSA now has the organisational resources to expand even though it finds the raising of funds a difficult process. Centres of support exist throughout South Africa, and since NEUSA has joined the grouping of educational organisations within the UDF, it has access to teachers on a wide front. Organisational growth and development are likely to characterise the next phase of NEUSA's history, with increasing support in the Cape and in Natal.

The optimistic tone of this description of NEUSA in the fourth year of its development is not unjustified despite the very bleak realities of the South African situation. Teachers are harassed because of NEUSA membership, there is sometimes strain on the resources of the organisation, and the field in which NEUSA works is extremely complex and demanding. The politics of teacher organisations are notoriously divisive and rancorous; education authorities are suspicious and defensive, and questions of education are always contentious. As NEUSA gains in experience it draws increasing confidence from those organisations which have determined to work, against massive opposition, for a just and democratic society. It is NEUSA's aim to contribute what it can towards that goal.

Explanations of the acronyms used:

AZASO	Azanian Student's Organisation
COSAS	Congress of South African Students
JOCTASA	Joint Council of Teachers' Association of South Africa
NEUSA	National Education Union of South Africa
SAIC	South African Indian Council
TASA	Teachers' Association of South Africa
UDF	United Democratic Front

The term 'student' is used for scholars and for students in tertiary education — a custom in South Africa. □