

SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS' ORGANISATION

c/o MEDICAL SCHOOL, 719 UMBILO ROAD, DURBAN.

[1970]

To:-

SRC Presidents (All South African Universities)
National Student Organisations
Other Organisations
Overseas organisations

Dear Sir,

Re: South African Students' Organisation (SASO)

SASO is a one-year old organisation which was established at the inaugural conference at the University of the North in July 1969.

The press has paid much attention to SASO especially during and after the first General Students' Council (GSC) held at the University of Natal-Black Section from the 4th to the 10th July 1970. In case any misconceptions have arisen, this circular is meant to give you and your organisation a true and first hand account of the factors that led to the establishment of the organisation. Furthermore it is meant to bring you up to date on matters of SASO policy and where we stand to-day in relation to the other student organisations in the country, and to student organisations beyond our borders.

Historical background

The implementation in 1960 of the Fort Hare Act of 1959 which brought Fort Hare under direct government control dealt a blow to student contact between that university and the rest of the student population. The dissolution of the SRC at Fort Hare in August that year by the students themselves was a sequel to the stringent measures applied at this then only black university to suppress the freedom of the students to meet and discuss with whom ever they wanted to.

Even more contained were the sister 'universities' that were established that same year i.e. University College of the Western Cape (for Coloureds), University College of Zululand (for Zulus), University College of the North (for Sothos), and the University College of Durban (for Indians).

The concept of an independent SRC was never known at these places. The Rector has virtually limitless powers of veto over anything that students decide to do. This power of veto was especially applied to all moves by the students to associate with Nusas. Hence the long period of isolation started.

The establishment of the University Movement (UCM) in 1967 opened new avenues for contact. UCM had a special appeal to students at the University Colleges. The fact that within a year and a half of its existence had UCM had already a black majority in its sessions is indicative of this. Hence with the continued getting together of students from the University Colleges, dialogue began again amongst black students.

One of the most talked-about topics was the position of the black students in the open organisations like Nusas and UCM. Concern was expressed that these were white-dominated and paid very little attention to problems peculiar to the black student community. In fact some people began to doubt the very competence of a pluralistic group to examine without bias problems affecting one group, especially when the unaffected lot is from the oppressor camp. It was felt that a time had come when blacks had to formulate

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their own thinking, unpolluted by ideas emanating from a group with lots at stake in the status quo.

There was nothing new in this kind of thinking. In bodies like the African Students' Association and the African Students' Union of South Africa, founded between 1960 and 1961 in the older black campuses, essentially the same underlying thinking was embodied. However these bodies died off for various reasons. The Durban Students' Union also came and went. The problem remained unsolved.

Some people amongst the black student community felt that the best approach would be a black take-over of the open student organisations engineered from within. However this idea never got any real support since to start with the black students at the University Colleges were not even allowed to participate freely in these organisations.

In the Nusas Congress of 1967 the blacks were made to stay at a Church building somewhere in Grahamstown location while the white delegates were staying in the Rhodes residences near the conference site. The Rhodes council was blamed for making it impossible for the blacks to stay in the residences. However no amount of protests could undo the damage. The conditions were so appalling that it showed the blacks just how valued they were in the organisation. This marked the turning point in the history of black support for Nusas.

The 1968 Nusas Congress was uneventful. The overriding impression one got was that the blacks were not really feeling a part of the organisation. The swing to the right was not countered by the blacks who were there in name only. Hence the Executive that was elected was all white.

Shortly thereafter, still in July, blacks at the UCM conference demanded time to meet alone. Ostensibly they were to discuss what to do in the face of the "72 hour clause" which forbade them to remain in a white area for more than 72 hours at a stretch. However once together and alone they discussed for the first time formally the idea of forming a blacks-only organisation.

They had to choose between a structured and a non-structured alliance and they decided on the former for the sake of continuity. The problem was that none of them were student leaders and therefore they could not take binding decisions.

In December 1968 a conference of SRCs from the black campuses decided overwhelmingly in favour of forming a black students' organisation and in July 1969 at the inaugural conference of SASO the organisation was formally founded.

It might probably be untrue to give the impression that everything was smooth. However most of the debate arose because of the tendency not to want to do what appears to conform with the government policy, ie to segregate against another group. To quote from the SASO Communique released at the end of the 1969 conference:-

(i) At a time when events are moving so fast in the country, it is not totally advisable to show any form of division amongst the student ranks - especially now that students appear to be a power to be reckoned with in this country.

(ii) Any move that tends to divide the student population into separate laagers on the basis of colour is in a way a tacit submission to defeat and seems apparently in agreement with apartheid

(iii) In a racially sensitive country like ours, provisions for racially exclusive bodies tend to widen the gap that already exists between races and to heighten resentment, and the the student community should resist all temptations to do this.

(iv) Any formation of a purely black organisation shall be subject to a lot of scrutiny and so the chances of the organisation lasting are very little.

This shows just how strong the doubts were amongst some black student leaders. However the argument to go ahead was much stronger. Specific counters to the argument presented in the four objections just quoted above were voiced and in the 1970 Conference these were crystallised and articulated far more forcefully. As a result the black student community now stands united in the belief that in their unity lies the strength to overcome so many problems they face first as students then as members of the oppressed community. Briefly Briefly these sentiments are expressed in the following :-

(i) Black students owe their first allegiance to the black community with whom they share the burdens and injustices of a apartheid. Student unity, where this involves consolidating ranks encompassing people of variable aspirations, is not to be encouraged. It has been shown in the past that Black-White student cooperation often leads to a divergance of expectations with the resultant frustrations.

(ii) The student population is already divided into laagers, and the socalled "open" organisations represent a farcical non-racial front that enjoys little support from all quarters and often is a cause for bitter strifes within the black student ranks. It might be more effective to go it alone instead of standing piously on ineffective platforms, issuing impotent fulminations against "the system".

(iii) It is essential for the black students to strive to elevate the level of consciousness of the black community by promoting awareness, pride, achievement and capabilities. In the long run this will prove far more valuable than the sentimental and idealistic attitude of perpetually trying to "bridge the gap" between races.

(iv) Many other black organisations do exist in the country and thus the establishment of SASO is not in itself an invitation to government inteference. Rather SASO should exerc exercise that prudence which is the hallmark of wisdom, while not sacrificing long-term goals. On the other hand we should always strive to avoid that plague - "paralysis of analysis" - which can only yield inaction and dispair.

Structure

In terms of structure SASO operates like a National Union although she does not claim to be one. The basic type of affiliation is "centre affiliation". The SRCs are the power bases. They affiliate on behalf of their student bodies. Where there is no SRC we accept majority student body decisions as automatic affiliation. Individual membership is also catered for.

The governing body of SASO is the General Students' Council which meets once a year. It consists of the delegates from the various centres and also the Executive. This is the official policy making body of SASO.

The Executive governs in between GSC sittings, working according to mandates given to it by the GSC. The president is the sole interpreter of policy in between sessions.

POLICY

Extensive policy discussion and study were undertaken at the 1970 SASO conference and concrete policy decisions were taken

a) NUSAS

SASO decided to withdraw recognition of NUSAS as a true National Union of students in South Africa today for the following reasons:-

- (i) There is a dichotomy between principle and practice in the organisation. We reject their basis of intergration as being based on standards predominantly set by white society. It is more of what the white man expects the black man to do than the other way round. We feel we do not have to prove ourselves to anybody.
- (ii) The fact that there are 27,000 white students and only 3,000 black students in the organisation means that black opinion assumes reduced influence. Thus NUSAS cannot claim to represent black student interests and aspirations.
- (iii) The commitment of white students to the principles of the organisation is limited to very few individuals and hence NUSAS credentials as a sincere and committed aspiration for change are wanting.

All in all SASO feels that NUSAS is a National Union on paper only, while in practice it is essentially a white English students' organisation.

b) A.S.B

This is the Afrikaans Studentebond, a culturally inclined organisation operating predominantly at the Afrikaans medium universities. Calvinism and Afrikanerdom are criteria for membership.

- (i) We uphold the right of any group to want to perpetuate their culture via this sort of organisation.
- (ii) Where this promotion of a group culture implies cultivation of racist tendencies then the "right" becomes a negative right like the right to kill.
- (iii) However SASO decided to maintain at least nominal contact with ASB in the belief that that to discuss any group as incorrigible would be an unfortunate thing especially in a country like South Africa.

c) U.C.M.

The University Christian Movement is a religious group concerning itself with ecumenical topics and modernisation of the archaic christian religious practice also it concerns itself with a practical application of christian principles in an immoral society like the South African one.

- (i) We believe to a great extent that UCM has overcome the problems of adjustment to a two tier society like ours. However we still feel that the fact that blacks are in the majority in the organisation has not been sufficiently in the direction of thought and in the leadership in the organisation

- (ii) We nevertheless feel that UCM'S progress is commendable especially in the direction of provoking meaningful thinking amongst clergymen, and its members.
- (iii) We welcome UCM'S efforts at practical and meaningful involvement in the black situation as evidenced by work projects black leadership training etc.

d) NAFSAS

This is the National Federation of South African Students. It seeks to establish contact among Black, English and Afrikaans students, ostensibly by avoiding taking a stand on contentious issues i.e. apartheid and its ramifications. Rather it aims at tea parties and similar forms of contact.

- (i) We regard with apprehension the fact that Blacks were excluded from the first conference of this organisation as indicative of its seeking black white contact on White terms.
- (ii) We take the view that there are more important issues in South Africa than multi-racial tea parties, that contact if decided upon should be a means to an end.
- (iii) We regard the type of inter-racial contact envisaged by this organisation as potentially harmful in blurring the burning issues in South Africa today confusing the priorities thus militating against black aspirations being met.
- (iv) We finally decided on nominal contact with NAFSAS in accordance with our policy of keeping avenues of communication open.

e) THE PRESS

SASO rejects the press and believes in having as little to do with it as possible. The press is largely directed at white society or the so-called electorate whose values are laced with prejudice against black people. Equally SASO rejects the black press which up to now has been largely controlled and some of it financed by government institutions. We believe that alongside Radio Bantu, most of the Black press is being used as instruments of propaganda to get people to swallow most of the unbalanced and inflated stories about "what the government is doing for the Bantus" or "....for the Indians" or "....for the coloureds"

f) PROTESTS

This was a hotly debated topic. The new view was expressed that silence in the face of injustice is tantamount to acceptance, and thus SASO could not escape the obligation to protest. The consensus was that the involvement of Black students in protests and public demonstrations was to be viewed with reservations, especially where black student interests were not directly involved. If protests are held they should be directed at the Black population, as part of the programme of alleviating their level of consciousness, and thus protests may have to assume new forms.

g) INDEPENDENCE FOR THE BLACK UNIVERSITIES

A policy motion expressing disapproval of independence as premature was passed by SASO GCM. The fear was raised that we were yielding to the temptation of "howling impotently at the heavens" about our woes. We should be working instead to alleviate the lot of the students enrolled at these Universities rather than condemning the circumstances assigned them by the system.

However the overriding view was that the issue was so burning and affecting black students directly and hence they would look up to SASO for direction and guidance that at least a policy stand had to be taken. It was noted with apprehension that the Universities concerned were under direct Government control with the student voice stifled.

Furthermore doubt was expressed whether these institutions, young and inexperienced as they are, would be able to maintain standards making for international recognition.

AIMS

The aims of SASO are concerned primarily with black students and the black community, and also with contact among students in general. International contact is also provided for. Put in a paraphrased form these are;-

- (i) To crystallise the needs and aspirations of the black students and to make known their grievances.
- (ii) Where possible to put into effect programmes designed to meet the needs of the black students and to act on a collective basis in an effort to solve some of the problems that beset the centres individually.
- (iii) To heighten the degree of contact amongst the black students and to make the black student accepted on their terms as an integral part of the South African community.
- (iv) To establish a solid identity amongst the black students and to ensure that these students are always treated with the dignity and the respect they deserve.
- (v) To protect the interests of the member centres and to act as a pressure group on all institutions and organisations for the benefit of the black students.
- (vi) To boost up the morale of the black student, to heighten their own confidence in themselves and to contribute largely to the direction of thought taken by the various institutions on social, political, educational and other current topics.

To this end efforts will be made to involve black students in constructive work projects involving health education, literacy training etc among the black population.

- (vii) To expand the horizons of knowledge, and awareness and to enhance the skills and capabilities of black students. International contact leadership training courses, the promotion of black cultural activities and sports it is hoped, will aid in this. A special department of publications has been created to keep students informed of all that is going on.

While these aims might appear to be couched in racialistic language they are in fact an indication that the black student community has at last lost faith in their white counterparts and is now withdrawing from the open society. The blacks are tired of standing at the touchlines to witness a game that they should be playing. They want to do things for themselves and all by themselves.

CONCLUSION

The growth of SASO and the ideals it stands for, as evidenced by the attendance at the 1970 conference, is an incontestable fact.

Our closed membership and our Black-oriented goals have been interpreted by some groups, including the A.S.B., as a rejection of nonracialism as a political goal. The fact, however, that we adopt a policy of keeping open the avenues of communication, as evidenced by our continual dialogue with NUSAS and UCM and constructive criticism of both organisations, belies this contention. Our nonracial approach is a means to an end - the realisation of justice, peace and goodwill in South Africa, which we believe are the aspirations of most of our sane countrymen. Right wing groups are, entitled to their beliefs about SASO and we do not attach much importance to their views. We believe that A.S.B. should be left alone to their small world of isolation whose boundaries are the four wheels of an ossewa.

Barney Pitjana
President