

**STUDENT ORGANISATION AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE  
IN SOUTH AFRICA : AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONGRESS OF  
SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS, 1979 - 1985**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER :

1. COSAS : AN OVERVIEW

2. COSAS AND THE LITERATURE ON POPULAR STRUGGLES: A  
CRITICAL REVIEW

3. HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS AND THE FORMATION OF COSAS

4. THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE OR THE EDUCATION STRUGGLE? : THE  
EMERGENCE OF COSAS'S DUAL CHARACTER, 1979-1982

5. "AT THE LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING OF OUR FELLOW STUDENTS :  
THE STRATEGIC RE-ORIENTATION OF COSAS, 1982-1983

6. "FROM ACTIVIST GROUP TO A MASS MOVEMENT" - COSAS, THE  
SCHOOL BOYCOTTS, AND THE POPULAR REVOLT, 1984-1985

7. IDEOLOGY AND ALLIANCES

8. CONCLUSION

9. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the memory of Siphiso Mtimkulu, a member of COSAS and outstanding activist from Port Elizabeth who "disappeared" early in 1982 after having launched a law suit against the Minister of Police, Louis le Grange, after being poisoned with thalium while in prison in 1981. Also, to the hundreds of students who lost life and limb in protest against inferior and racist education.

## INTRODUCTION

The decade of the 1980's in South Africa saw the eruption of unprecedented popular resistance in the black townships, irrevocably transforming society and politics. (1) This development represents the culmination and of struggles at three levels: students' educational struggles; civic struggles and the national political struggle. The Congress of South African Students (COSAS) has been at the centre of this intersection of struggles. In studies of student struggles in the 1980's, and of popular resistance in general, COSAS is much cited. Yet there is a curious lack of any systematic analysis of the organisation in terms of its character, origins, development and impact.

There are arguably at least two reasons which explain this important gap in the literature. Firstly, most analyses have over-emphasised the spontaneity of the popular struggles of the 1980's, with the role of formal organisations largely treated as incidental. The failure to focus analysis specifically on the formal organisations seeking to harness popular movements reduces our understanding of the conditions under which they succeed or fail, of how they are transformed in the process, and how, in turn, they lend a cutting edge to popular struggles. Secondly, researching student organisations poses methodological problems. The availability of primary documentary evidence is scant. What there is of documentary material by COSAS has either been "lost" in the course of

the organisation's vicissitudinous history, or is under confiscation by the South African security police. Moreover, there have been no major state trials focussing on COSAS, and therefore no collections of legal records. As for COSAS leadership, most went into exile and those remaining have been difficult to trace. Then, there is the problem, characteristic of student organisations as opposed to civic organisations or trade unions - rapid turnover in membership.

These two considerations probably go some of the way towards explaining the relative shortage of research on the organisational aspects of student struggles as a component of popular resistance in the 1980's. My aim is to trace the origins and evolution of COSAS since its formation in 1979, to characterise its nature, and to assess its political impact until its banning in 1985. Given that this study relies on thin evidence for the reasons already mentioned, it does not purport to be a comprehensive account of how COSAS evolved nationally or in any specific region. Rather, my analysis will hopefully both illuminate the general pattern of COSAS's development, as well as be broadly applicable to local experiences. Until in-depth local area studies are made, the complete story of COSAS will still remain untold.

Again, due to insufficient evidence, extensive reference will be made to secondary material, especially the student newspapers published by the South African Students'

Press Union (SASPU) - initiated by the COSAS-linked National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). In addition, interviews with former COSAS activists will be used, as well as my own personal recollections as a founder member of COSAS and its national organiser from 1982-83.

It is necessary to recognise the inherent weaknesses of this type of evidence. The problem is one of reliability given the propagandistic bias of SASPU newspapers. And, in the case of oral evidence, the natural selectivity of memories, as well as the tendency for current interests and values to colour recollections of past events, also pose a problem. In this light, I shall attempt to be as objective as possible.

I shall begin with an overview of the history of COSAS, after which I shall briefly outline the background to its formation, focussing on the struggles of 1976-77 and their aftermath. I shall then develop an analytic framework for this study and set out its central thesis by way of a critical review of the literature's treatment of COSAS. The main section of the study will be a chronological analysis of the origins and development of COSAS and will include its organisational evolution, its activities, ideological orientation and alliances. Finally, an assessment of the strengths and achievements of COSAS will conclude the study.

## CHAPTER ONE: COSAS: AN OVERVIEW

COSAS was formed in June 1979 with the aim of organising black high school students nationally. The initiative originated from ex-student activists who regrouped after state suppression of the 1976-77 student revolts. The impact of the 1976 uprisings was to politicise students on a mass scale and to propel them into the national political arena. Hence the initial intention of the founders of COSAS was to form a national political organisation. However, they were advised by senior political leaders in the "liberation movement" to organise students and youth.

Initially, COSAS was slow to grow and was largely unknown among the students it sought to organise, partly because of state attempts at suppression. Soon after it was launched, the state detained almost its entire national leadership. COSAS's first president, Ephraim Mogale, was subsequently charged with furthering the aims of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), and was sentenced to eight years in prison on Robben Island.

Another reason for the slow development of COSAS was that, in the early days, its activists prioritised national political issues as a basis of organisational activities. It was education-based issues, however, which gradually impelled students into spontaneous activity (eg. the 1980 school boycotts), and, in response, COSAS increasingly orientated itself towards addressing student concerns.

Through its participation in the campaigns of the early 1980's, COSAS became part of, and in a sense pioneered, the revival of national political opposition, marking the end of the "quiescences" that followed both the banning of the ANC and PAC in 1960 and the suppression of the 1976-77 revolt. In 1980, COSAS adopted the Freedom Charter and was followed by a host of other emergent organisations in a development which represented the rise of an ANC-inclined legal, extra-parliamentary movement.

During this period, the nascent independent trade union movement began asserting itself with a number of industrial strikes, some of which COSAS and other community organisations supported through consumer boycotts. This cultivated an atmosphere whereby the struggles of students, workers and community were to be mutually supportive, being expressed in the theme "Student-Worker Action" adopted by COSAS in 1982.

At the same time, COSAS expressed its increasing focus on the education struggle by adopting the Education Charter Campaign with the Azanian Students' Organisation (AZASO), and with the support of NUSAS. From 1983, as school boycotts became increasingly common, COSAS's re-orientation of strategy towards education-based issues took on renewed urgency. COSAS leaders stressed schools as the main organisational centres and reiterated COSAS's stated objectives, among which was to strive for "free, compulsory, dynamic education in a non-racial and democratic South



Africa". COSAS leaders thus prioritised the building of organisation and appealed to students by articulating short-term demands on the basis of immediate grievances.

As student protests escalated throughout the country in 1984, so COSAS became popular, stronger and larger. Students in different regions focussed on different demands, and these were co-ordinated nationally. Thus, the organisation increasingly functioned as a mass movement.

Given that the school boycotts took place in the context of national political campaigns led by the United Democratic Front (UDF) - of which COSAS was an affiliate - and civic struggles, education demands became increasingly linked to community and national political issues, students being seen as part of the oppressed communities - as articulated in the preamble of the COSAS constitution. Therefore, the education struggle could not be separated from the broader struggle against apartheid. This view was actualised in the COSAS-initiated stay-away by students and workers in the Transvaal in November 1984. The successful stay-away was an unprecedented massive show of support, by workers and the community, for students' demands.

Throughout 1985, the boycotts widely disrupted the normal functioning of township schools. A national mass movement of students led by COSAS was forged and spearheaded a national political struggle which developed into a crisis. In this context, the state intensified its attempts at

suppression. This left many students, including COSAS members, dead, injured or detained.

In July 1985, the state imposed a state of emergency in the flashpoints of the boycotts, accompanied by further detentions of hundreds of COSAS members. Finally, on 28 August 1985, COSAS was banned. This widely-condemned move on the part of the state represented the culmination of its attempts to crush COSAS.

After the banning of COSAS, some observers said that all the organisation did was to articulate students' grievances deriving from an inferior education system. They argued that until student demands were met for immediate improvements in their schooling conditions and for a non-racial, democratic education system, resistance will continue to be the life experience of black students in South Africa.

In this study, I argue that while the character of COSAS derived from its embodiment of students' educational resistance; this was only one aspect of its identity. A second dimension is based on the fact that black education and resistance to it do not occur in a structural and historical vacuum.

Two factors imparted to COSAS a broader political character and orientation. First was the awareness that inferior, racially-divided education reflected and served the wider social divides of apartheid. Secondly, was the historical awareness that COSAS was not by any means

beginning a new struggle, and was in fact drawing lessons from past struggles. It is in this dual character of COSAS - simultaneously an education-based student organisation and a politically-motivated formation - that its strength lies. Ironically, this, as we shall see, also became a source of organisational weakness, especially during the early days of its existence.

CHAPTER TWO: COSAS AND THE EMERGENCE OF POPULAR  
RESISTANCE IN THE 1980S : A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

Much of the recent study on South African politics in the 1980s is concerned with analysing the upsurge of nationwide resistance of the post-1983 period. Some analyses are general while others focus on specific sites of resistance (eg civic, students/education, youth and workers). (1) All analyses have in common the application of race, the state, class, generational conflict, as well as the notion of popular struggle as tools for understanding the mass uprisings of 1984-86.

Underlying the concept of popular struggle is the distinction made between mass movements of resistance and the formal organisations which seek to harness their energy (2). Thus, with respect to the upsurge in the townships in 1984-86, Mark Swilling asserts that: "it was not caused by the UDF (ie a national political body) national leadership. With the exception of key national campaigns...the driving force of resistance came from below, as communities responded to their terrible living conditions. (3)

While there is truth in this analysis, there is also an implicit dichotomy set up between popular resistance on the one hand, and national political organisations on the other. The general tendency in the literature on popular struggles is to emphasise the objective structural/institutional context which gives rise to revolt. Political mobilisation,

in turn, is treated secondarily, as if it grows from the revolt, rather than contributes to it.

The complex interface between disparate and localised protests and organisations pursuing broader political goals is recognised but only rarely explicated. At best, the generalisation and radicalisation of local and disparate struggles is primarily attributed to the coercive response of the state, and secondarily to the role of formal organisations. For example, Jeremy Seekings argues:

"...as residents responded to grievances by organising themselves, and the state responded to protest with overtly political repression, the initially localised grievances were seen to be bound up with the fundamental issue of access to political power, both locally and nationally...Repression only served to politicise popular grievances...Protests in the township increasingly addressed explicitly political issues, not because the origins of political mobilisation had primarily involved a concern for national political rights, but rather because the state refused to tolerate township residents' struggles to define the townships in terms of their needs and demands, rather than the local state's fiscal or political requirements".(4)

Clearly, an approach that sees in popular struggles purely "grievance" or "protest" movements against the presumed limits of which national political organisations are working does not capture their complexity and significance.

While the structural context - involving socio-economic and political-institutional factors - is clearly fundamental in the outburst of popular protest, their content cannot simply be deduced on this basis. Rather, it also reflects the subjective milieu of the protests, in which the terms of resistance were increasingly being shaped by the organisational interventions of especially the ANC/UDF/community/youth/students organisational nexus. Thus in the analysis of the content of popular protests, it is difficult to separate long-standing political aspirations of political organisations, and the more immediate needs and demands to which they are a response.

Many activists organising either township residents or students locally during the early to mid-1980s, were careful to limit themselves to immediate grievances. These activists experienced positive responses beyond their expectations, as residents and students showed willingness to act not only for their grievances but also for general political aspirations. During their canvassing for support, COSAS experienced instances of elderly residents wishing to join them, seemingly attracted by its militancy.(5)

Some analysts offer explanations of popular struggles not only in terms of the objective structural conditions but also of the political interventions especially by the aforementioned nexus or the so-called "Charterist" movement.

For Harold Wolpe, the point of these popular struggles is that: "they were neither sporadic nor confined to a

narrow spectrum of issues...Although the struggles and the issues were frequently local and desperate, varied and diffuse, two factors were at work which tended to unite them at an ideological and policy level as well as organisationally. Firstly, they were occurring in a situation in which the ANC, which had re-emerged as the leading national liberation organisation, emphasised, particularly through the Freedom Charter, the linkage between specific demands of separate struggles and their common solution in the elimination of the apartheid system...Secondly, regulation by the state of the conditions of life of the black people and their subordination in every sphere to the structures of white domination, served both to politicise all demands and to link them". (6)

In a review of recent South African studies, CRD Halisi is concerned with whether analyses articulate the mutual influence between popular struggles and formal organisations. What emerges is that "popular protests are not merely spontaneous, nihilistic outbursts of black anger and frustration". Rather, "they are structured within a culture of political resistance" in which "black opposition organisations articulate fairly well-defined political principles, including non-collaboration with government institutions, non-racialism, democracy and direct action". (7)

It is worth remarking the extent to which the mobilising role of the Freedom Charter is not analysed, with

two recent exceptions (8). Mostly, the concern with the Freedom Charter has been in terms of it defining the strategic direction for the ANC. Its practical role in informing the organisational forms and mode of struggle of popular protests is largely under-analysed.

The point is not to argue that popular protests simply embraced the principles articulated by the formal organisations, nor that they are necessarily orientated towards their national political goals. Indeed, non-collaboration was not universal, as illustrated by the case of popular Durban leader, Msizi Dube, who was involved in the township council. Non-racialism, for its part, had fragile roots, and democracy was often undefined. (9)

Rather, the point is that it is possible to put forward an analysis of the popular struggles of 1984-86 that concedes a more salient role by political organisations in influencing the terms of resistance than is available. With respect to the ANC, John Saul calls attention to how it has defined public mood and given added resonance and concrete programmatic expression to popular aspirations (10). According to Saul, this was achieved through such ANC focuses as the anti-South African Indian Council and anti-Republic Day campaigns, the Free Mandela initiative, the attack upon the tricameral parliament, the widely-publicised emphasis on, first, "ungovernability" and then "from ungovernability to people's power", and the



successful attempt to bring the Freedom Charter back into prominence.

Qualifying this Saul adds that "It would appear that, in many of these activities and campaigns, the ANC has been responding to assertions already bubbling up in the communities, atleast as much as it has been stimulating popular energies". (11)

On a narrower focus, studies of educational struggles have also tended to neglect political and organisational aspects. In a study of educational resistance and the student movement, Jonathan Hyslop puts forward this view:

"To understand the role of student grievances in bringing about revolt we must analyse changes within the education system, drawing on the concepts of class and social reproduction. How the state attempted to regulate the reproduction of the labour force, how the dominated classes responded to these changes, and how the state and capital in turn reacted to these popular responses: it is by looking at these historical questions that the student movement can be understood". (12)

Here again, stress is laid on the structural factors accounting for the emergence of student resistance. In a similar vein Linda Chisholm offers an explanation in terms of "the intensification of class and national struggles, shifts in the economy and society, the limits and contradictions of state strategy in education" (13). Chisholm's account is concerned to show that "class and

national struggle intensified during the 1970s and 1980s, as the grip of recession and unemployment tightened its hold on townships already poverty-stricken and deprived". In this context, state initiatives [were] aimed at increased control, through both reform and bullets". Therefore, "schools and youth became an important focus of resistance".

Colin Bundy's analysis, while also stressing broad structural features of the context of students/youth, also employs the notion of "generational unit", drawn from the work of Karl Mannheim (14). In Bundy's framework, a sociological generation, as opposed to an age-based generation, is defined as a group with its own generational consciousness:

"By grappling with a distinct set of social and historical problems they develop an awareness and common identity - a generational consciousness analogous to class consciousness and national consciousness". (15)

While they are valid, the socio-political/economic and generational factors stressed in this account are only part of the explanation of student resistance. A thorough examination of the processes by which black teenagers became the "shock troops of a nationwide political insurrection" (16) must include an analysis of the organisational underpinnings. As Nozipho Diseko argues, the above accounts fail to explain how the factors stressed were translated into the militant action by students/youth during 1984-85 (17).

According to her, "Where student organisation is mentioned, it is portrayed as one of the features of struggle, rather than an explanatory factor". Diseko feels that Bundy's analysis "conveys a limited understanding of the process involved in the politicisation of the students and youth in South Africa in a way which gives the impression that this occurs primarily within the group itself". For Diseko, the "missing link" in accounts which stress socio-economic and generational factors is "the crucial role played by student organisations in harnessing these factors and raising both the militancy and the political awareness of the students". (18)

Consequently, Diseko uses COSAS to illustrate the importance of student organisation as an explanatory factor rather than as one of the features of the education struggle.

Graeme Bloch, in a study of organisation in the Western Cape school struggles (1986-88), is critical of both "right-wing" critiques of student militancy (such as found in the commercial media) and "left-wing" critiques (such as Bundy's). These, according to Bloch, tend to focus on outward manifestations of student militancy, while neglecting the underlying organisational preconditions making such actions possible. (19)

Charles Carter's study of student activities in Alexandra township also highlights the "problematic 'silences' in the existing literature, concerning the

organisational bases of school and township unrest" (20). Carter observes how "the process by which young people succeed in translating their beliefs into political action" has received only passing reference in the literature.

This, according to him, is indicative of a general lack of knowledge of youth activity in South Africa. Carter's study illustrates how Alexandra student activists, by adopting the Freedom Charter, have made the UDF and ANC a "lived reality".

### 2.1. SITUATING COSAS ANALYTICALLY

In the above survey, I have sought to find an analytical framework within which formal organisations in the popular movements of the 1980s can be understood as an autonomous contributory factor influencing and being influenced by these phenomena. It was found that while analyses recognise the importance of organisations in relation to popular movements, there is very little examination of their contribution.

Thus, despite the phenomenal growth and influence attained by COSAS by 1985 when it was banned, Bundy's appraisal of the student/youth politics in Cape Town during this period fails to associate them with organisational processes originating within COSAS since 1982. There are only two references to COSAS in this regard: firstly, in a footnote reference to a pamphlet issued jointly with AZASCO and NUSAS in April 1985, and stressing the need for

student/parent co-operation. Secondly, in a sentence stating COSAS's importance as a "source of ideas at high school".

(21)

In general, within the structural analysis in the literature on popular struggles, there is little room to pose organisational questions about these phenomena. Thus, the circumstances under which formal political organisations emerge, how they evolve, their success or failure, strengths and weaknesses, how they are transformed by popular movements, remain moot questions with which this study shall be concerned.

I shall conclude this chapter by outlining analytic guidelines for this study. In the next chapter, I will set out the historical background against which COSAS emerged, as well as its more immediate political context.

In as much as the focus in analyses on the context of popular struggles does not account for organisational processes, so the origins and development of COSAS cannot be understood without reference to the influence of these factors. This suggests the need for an analytical framework in which the interaction between structurally-engendered popular assertions and organisational initiatives is articulated.

In this regard, the framework of Janice Love and Peter C. Sederberg in their analysis of recent black educational resistance in South Africa is suggestive (22). Drawing from some of the social movement literature of the last two

decades, Love and Sederberg analyse the emergence of educational resistance movements during the 1980s in terms of the following factors: discontent, opportunity and resources, the latter which basically involves organisational aspects.

#### 2.1.1. DISCONTENT

Discontent or grievances are conceived in terms of both underlying and exacerbating causes. Underlying causes pertain to the structural position of black people in the apartheid state, providing constant grievance. Exacerbating causes pertain to socio-economic and political changes which add to the burdens of already deprived communities.

In terms of this perspective, Love and Sederberg state that the educational protests of the 1980s were a reflection of fundamental deprivations embedded in the apartheid system and exacerbating conditions more immediate to the 1984-85 school boycott.

Against the background of inferior and education, and the punitive nature of apartheid, the education crisis which steadily developed after 1976, as well as rising unemployment, provided the exacerbation from which student and youth resistance arose.

The education crisis has been attributed to the expansion in student school enrolments throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This is the outcome of three cross-cutting pressures. Firstly, from the business sector, which urged

more schooling for blacks so as to meet the skills needs of the rapidly industrialising economy. Secondly, from demographic pressures, whereby the number of African and Coloured teenagers were rapidly rising. Thirdly, from the contradictory responses to the 1976 uprisings from apartheid reformers who thought it would suffice to increase the quantity of "Bantu Education" on one hand, and conservatives who resisted changes.

Thus the already discontented black students experienced more school overcrowding and other severe educational defects, and had larger numbers of students from which to organise resistance to such conditions (23). While large student numbers implied greater socio-economic aspirations, the downturns in the economy implied more unemployment, this situation being the recipe for the explosion of the 1980s.

As Bundy describes: "Take politically rightless, socially subordinate, economically vulnerable youths, educate them in numbers beyond their parents' wildest dreams, but in grotesquely inadequate institutions, ensure that their awareness is shaped by punitive social practices in the world beyond the schoolyard - and then dump them in large numbers on the economic scrapheap". (24)

While this was the immediate context of student and youth resistance, it coincided with wider community and national political level - unemployment and demographic explosion, the fiscal array of local government, the rising

cost of living, and the state's efforts to create a widened popular legitimacy through tricameral constitutional reforms and the Black Local Authorities. The decentralised, localised community struggles arising from this context were linked with student struggles. In turn, these were politicised and linked to UDF-led national political campaigns.

#### 2.1.2. OPPORTUNITY

Missing in the above account are factors accounting for the likelihood of mobilisation for resistance. This involves the capacities of the contending forces and draws attention to the last two factors in Love and Sederberg's framework, viz opportunity and resources.

According to them, the extent to which the socio-economic and political changes which aggravate discontent also disrupt the status quo, they also provide an opportunity for mobilisation. The authors highlight that "Commonly, social movement theorists argue that something must weaken social control in order to provide the space for resistance movements to develop". (25)

The authors draw attention to divisions within the ruling establishment as immediate sources of expanded opportunities for resistance. In South Africa, this involves the divisions within the dominant order arising from the increasing tensions between various reformist and



conservative elements within the state and between the state and capital (26).

In particular, with regard to state reforms, Mark Swilling makes the point that "the intention of official policies...differ markedly from the way policies are implemented and the social processes to which they give rise". (27)

Harold Wolpe draws attention to some of the reformist measures which have created a space within which it was possible to build mass organisations. These include the state's allowance of political activity, whilst limiting the objectives which may be pursued; the privileging, to some extent, of selected classes of black subjects with the intention of either creating divisions among the black masses by the creating of a "Third Force", or co-opting sections of the population into working with the regime.(28) Drawing from McAdam, Love and Sederberg highlight two "facilitative effects" resulting from regime divisions and reforms. First, "they improve the chances for successful social protest by reducing the power discrepancy between insurgent groups and their opponents". Second, the improvements in the relative power position of the resistance movement "raises significantly the costs of repressing insurgent groups" (29). However, as pointed out, these two advantages assume that one seizes the opportunities created by weakened social control. This leads

to the third factor which highlights the importance of organisation as a distinct site of analysis.

### 2.1.3. RESOURCES

This basically involves five aspects of organisation which are identified as sources of strength in resistance:

(i) Members; who "by virtue of their involvement in organisation serve as the associational network out of which the new resistance movement emerges".

(ii) Established solidarity incentives - ie collective interests with which potential supporters can identify.

(iii) Communication networks; through which the goals and directives can be communicated to potential members.

(iv) Leaders

(v) Cognitive liberation - ie the analyses and understandings which guide resistance. (30)

The strength of Love and Sederberg's framework is the way it centralises organisational considerations crucial to the translation of discontent into successful mobilisation. In this way, organisation is seen as filling the interstices between the underlying structural causes of discontent on one hand, and the exacerbating causes thanks to which discontent bursts into resistance. By recruiting members, establishing solidarity incentives and communication networks, by developing leaders and liberating them and the membership "cognitively", organisation provides the context

in which small-scale dress rehearsals for resistance occur. As Graeme Bloch puts it:

"Organisation provides a space within which alternative definitions, discourses and practices may be generated and sustained. Organisation implies collective action, thought and response. More specifically, organisation is itself an educational process. In the heat of organisation and collective action, very real transformations occur in the consciousness of participants. These experiences are not transitory, but provide ideological, intellectual and practical lessons...While organisation is crucial for its oppositional aspect, it also creates points of interaction and contact of more positive import". (31)

Love and Sederberg's emphasis on the distinction between the underlying causes of discontent on the one hand, and the exacerbating causes of resistance on the other, can be used to explain the two dimensional character of COSAS. In one sense, the fundamentally political nature of COSAS reflected the awareness of its members and broader constituency of their social status as defined by inferior education and the apartheid system. COSAS also defined itself in terms of its concern with immediate student grievances within the education crisis. As will emerge in this study, while these two dimensions of COSAS's nature were ideologically linked, tensions between them often arose.

The dominance of either of the two dimensions - the fundamental political dimension or its education-based orientation - changed according to the national political context, which impacted on COSAS's work.

As we shall see, in the early 1980s, COSAS's more explicitly political concerns dominated its organisational activities. Towards the mid-1980s, as the deepening education crisis fostered student protests, COSAS's education-focussed orientation became salient.

In general, the central point of this study is that the resistance and organisation of students (and youth in general) originating in the black educational structures have tended to reflect the countrywide and underlying basis of conflict (ie apartheid/capitalism), as well as more immediate exacerbating causes. This is reflected in the dual character of COSAS. However, as a rule, the role played by education in the maintainance of apartheid and capitalism has always been clear to students (32).

In order to understand COSAS in its dual dimensions, it is necessary to examine its historical antecedents, focussing on the student struggles of 1976-77.

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

1. As used here, the term "black" refers to those classified by the state as "non-white". I shall also use the "racial" categories enforced by the state ie African, Coloured and Indian, when necessary. Such usage does not indicate my acceptance of such categories.

### CHAPTER TWO

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23. Ibid p 320-1
24. Bundy, op cit, p 313
25. Love & Sederberg, op cit p306; The social movement theorists referred to here are Doug McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-70 (Chicago 1982); Charles Tilly, From Mobilisation to Revolution (Reading, Mass, 1978), and Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions (Cambridge 1979)
26. On this point also see Mark Swilling, in Philip Frankel et al, 1988

27. Ibid, p 7

28. Wolpe, op cit p 94

29. Love & Sederberg, op cit p 307

30. ibid

31. Bloch, op cit p 115-7

32. see Love & Sederberg, op cit, esp p 314; also see Anon, "Black Education & Resistance" in Work in Progress 13, July 1980, pp 65-74

CHAPTER THREE: HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS AND THE FORMATION OF  
COSAS : 1976 - 1979

This is not intended to be a reconstruction of the student revolts of 1976-77 (1). Rather, it seeks to draw out the organisational and ideological aspects of the revolt, and to show how these shaped the political context in which COSAS emerged.

It is generally acknowledged that the revolts of 1976-77 marked a turning point in South African history indicating the extent of discontent and resistance to apartheid oppression. Consequently, most analyses of the of these events have tended to focus on their challenge to apartheid, and their influence on the revolutionary strategy of the liberation movements. For Hyslop, the school student uprisings, and the mass support gained, helped to block forever the state's construction of Verwoed's apartheid blueprint (2).

John Kane-Berman attaches greater significance to the fact that the revolts occurred against the background of the guerilla insurgency adopted by the ANC and PAC (3). Thus, he argues "Ultimately...the exodus of students from Soweto and other townships may turn out to have greater import for South Africa's future than their activities within the townships".

Clearly, the township struggles of the mid-1980s belied Kane-Berman's assessment - apart from the contribution made by the ANC's armed activity, the popular struggles of recent



times provided a unique impetus to the current political denouement in South Africa. The importance of the broader political implications of the 1976-77 revolts is clear. What is recognised but not always specifically analysed is how the organisational and ideological questions they posed influenced the revival of student activism, national political opposition and mass struggles in the 1980s. A brief recapitulation of aspects of the revolts is in order.

(4)

It is well known that the school students uprisings which started in Soweto on 16 June 1976 were sparked off by the introduction of Afrikaans as a compulsory medium of educational instruction. The subsequent revolt which spread throughout the country had its roots in Soweto, where the students had formed the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC), drawing its leaders and cadreship from the school-based South African Student Movement (SASM) which had already agitated against the Afrikaans issue from early 1976.

SASM's links with the university-based South African Student Organisation (SASO), and its off-shoot, the Black People's Convention (BPC), provided the revolts with a broader ideological context. The SSRC-SASM, SASO and BPC links were founded on common identification with "black consciousness", a diffuse ideology influential during the 1976-77 uprisings.

The student uprisings, though starting as a reaction to Afrikaans, entailed a rejection of the entire Bantu Education System and of apartheid. This was partly due to the state brutality during the uprising, resulting in over a thousand deaths by the end of 1977.

In this context, student leaders began looking to the workers, parents and communities for support. During 1976 Soweto workers responded positively to three SSRC calls for stay-aways. The only incident which marred the success of this stay-away action involved an attack on students and residents by Mzimbhlophe migrant workers, resulting in twenty deaths.

The greatest victories won by the SSRC were those relating to the proposed rent increases, and the abolition of the Urban Bantu Council in Soweto. Other student actions included the destruction of a township beer-hall, and successful calls for a boycott of Christmas shopping as a symbol of mourning the casualties of the revolts.

However, the student militancy proved to be no match for the state's violent capacity and in due course the revolts were quelled. In October 1977, the government banned eighteen organisations including SASM, SASO, BPC and SSRC, as well as three newspapers and a number of political activists.

The massacre of unarmed people by the state, and widescale detentions of students and youth, led to many exiles with the aim of obtaining military training. Many

joined the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, thus raising the strength and morale of the ANC in general. From 1977, armed activity within South Africa was stepped up and was to play an increasingly important role in the national struggle.

### 3.1. THE ROLE OF SASM

The earlier activism of SASM was crucial in the direction of the student revolts. Although mainly in the Transvaal, SASM was growing rapidly, especially in the Eastern Cape. Branches were discussion forums on common topics like education, politics and black consciousness. Increasingly, SASM, like SASO and BPC, came under security police harassment, a growing number of its members being arrested and interrogated.

As they became more politicised, SASM and its allied youth organisations, began to see the overthrow apartheid as the only way for black improvement.

From 1974 some SASM members began to organise small groups which met secretly to discuss the need for armed struggle. This was often done under the direction of ANC underground structures. These groups made preparations to recruit and send people out of the country for military training and guided the work of their members in SASM and other organisations.

While the police smashed some of these groups, others continued and it was through them that the ANC recruited activists from SASM and hence from the SSRC.

Although many of the student activists were strongly influenced by black consciousness, a growing number now came into contact with the Freedom Charter and the political experience of the ANC. The apparent ease with which the ANC made inroads into SASM lends weight to the assertion made by some analysts that SASM was ideologically autonomous from other black consciousness groups.

Brickhill and Brooks, and Baruch Hirson discern no direct link between SASM and the Black Consciousness groups, and are accused by Tom Lodge of underplaying the importance of black consciousness (BC) in the 1976-77 revolts (5).

Significantly, some SASM members were instrumental in the formation of COSAS, an ANC-aligned organisation, in later years.

### 3.2. IDEOLOGY, ALLIANCES AND THE QUESTION OF THE ANC

On the whole, the students involved in the 1976 revolts were guided by an ideology which was limited in terms of the broader goal of overthrowing apartheid. BC ideology claimed to oppose both capitalism and socialism, seeing them as foreign and imperialistic. BC was seen as being able to formulate political, social and economic demands which could be found in the heritage of "black culture", and would ensure the creation of a new social order.

While it had fostered black pride, its penetration beyond students and the intelligensia was just beginning. Moreover, its organisational base was too narrow, and its popular support too limited for it to withstand state attack.

On the other hand, the SSRC were confronted with a situation of heavy responsibility. As Baruch Hinson puts it:

"The transition from classroom discussion to strike and then revolt was far from simple...the students had to define and redefine their position in society, and establish a relationship with the non-schooling youth, with parents, and with the wider working-class community. There were severe short-comings that had to be overcome in their understanding of (black) social forces...In the course of time these youths would also have to face advances from members of both open and clandestine movements, and take decisions on proposals that they work with (or even under) the aegis of the BPC or the ANC. They had to decide on public statements and press interviews, make pronouncements on violence and non-violence, on strikes and boycotts; and more prosaically, on whether to return to schools, and whether pupils should write examinations". (6)

In the face of these daunting responsibilities, the SSRC took almost all the decisions by itself. Appearing openly when there were no other functioning widely representative non-clandestine bodies, leaders of the SSRC claimed on occasion to be the "national leaders". (7)

Their attempts at an worker alliance was weakened by their belief that they were in a position of leadership. Moreover, initially student militants appeared to have been more concerned with preventing workers from going to work - "to strike at the industrial structure of South Africa" - rather than to recruit them as partners in the struggle (8).

The Mzimhlophe migrant workers backlash was partly a consequence of the SSRC strategy, which allowed for coercion.

In spite of the importance the ANC attached to the student revolt, as seen by the leaflets distributed by its underground structures, its formal attempts to link up with the SSRC were rejected by Tsietsi Mashinini, the SSRC president at the time. (9)

This view was justified on the grounds that liberation movements had not made any progress in the struggle. In the event, the ANC continued to operate separately, relying on those members of its underground structures who were on the SSRC executive, to influence events.

At a public level, the ANC responded rapidly to the revolt, mainly through its underground propaganda media. The ANC call in July 1976 for the revolt to be taken into the cities, factories and mines, either coincided with, or helped to shape, part of the SSRC strategy in the coming period. At an underground level, there were also occasional meetings between the SSRC president and exiled leaders.

However, the extent of the ANC's impact on the 1976-77 revolts remains an open question. What is undisputable is that the ANC was not able to act directly in the revolts and, in spite of its interventions, no coherent national programme was developed among students to carry the revolt forward.

With the state's crackdown, the mass student movement was in disarray, the leadership of the SSRC was neutralised by detentions, and finally the organisation was banned. Although the struggle flared up again with the forming of a new organisation, the Soweto Students' League (SSL) by April 1978 school boycotts had subsided.

The SSL decided to call for a return to classes in 1978. The uprising ended, but it was a temporary respite before the struggle would be revived. In the interim, the balance of power was in favour of the state. From 1978, there were several state trials arising out of the recent uprisings, including the trial of SSRC members and other ANC-related groups.

### 3.3. QUO VADIS BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS? 1978-1980

The impulse for political revival after the 1976-77 uprisings came from three different sources: foremost, ex-SASM and SSRC student activists, began to regroup after their release from detention, and to seek ways of continuing the struggle. Secondly, the ANC's profile grew rapidly,

reflecting the influence of its organisational and ideological intervention during and after the uprisings.

In addition to the links with student leaders, the ANC was actively spreading its ideas by all available means, including the secret distribution of publications, and the broadcast of "Radio Freedom" from independent African states. Most significantly, the experience of the 1976-77 revolt had led the ANC to form a strategy combining military activity with political forms of struggle.

The latter leg of this strategy entailed the extension of its underground network, the encouragement of the forming of legal political organisations orientated towards the Freedom Charter, and forging links with existing ones. The third impulse for revival came from black consciousness activists and ex-members of SASO, BPC and allied groups, banned in 1977.

While a revivalist impulse was clear, the decisive question regarded the path along which the struggle was to continue. On the one hand, the ANC was exercising a powerful influence among some student activists, but on the other, many sought to rebuild the Black Consciousness movement.

In the ensuing debates, differences surfaced which were to remain throughout the 1980s. The formation of the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) in 1978, and of COSAS in 1979, began the institutionalisation of these ideological differences, representing the B.C. and the so-called "Charterist" approach respectively. (10)



#### 3.4. COSAS AND THE REALIGNMENT OF 1979-80

Jeremy Seekings divides the post-1976 revival of national opposition politics into two key periods of transition and realignment (11). The first, 1979-80, saw the re-emergence of the "Charterist" movement. The second, 1983-84, saw this movement attain dominance in opposition politics.

The first realignment resulted from the perceived need, both inside and outside the country, for strategic changes in opposition politics. As aforementioned, the ANC was already exercising a powerful impulse for change in the direction of the Freedom Charter. As the Charter gained prominence, activists and groups were pressurised to reveal their position with regard to the competing ideological approaches to the struggle. (12)

It was AZAPO's formation in 1978 which brought the ideological differences to the fore. Being the first organisation to be formed since the bannings of October 1977, AZAPO placed itself within the B.C camp with its motto "One Azania, One Nation". However, in its public statements, AZAPO emphasised its organisational autonomy and non-alignment (13).

This did not impress many ANC-inclined activists, especially the ex-student leaders. They felt that AZAPO's avowed BC-inclination and non-alignment did not meet the perceived need for changes in the national political struggle. However, they remained close to AZAPO in the hope of influencing it to change course.

In the meantime, they were exploring possibilities of forming a new organisation with a different ideological inclination (14). These processes trace the origins of COSAS.

### 3.5. THE EMERGENCE OF COSAS

The initiative to form COSAS came in 1978, from ex-SASM student activists involved in the 1976 revolts, among which were ex-students who had been recruited into the ANC's underground structures. Initially, the idea was to form a national political organisation, as described by Super Moloj:

"The idea to form COSAS...was born during the period we spent in prison under Section 10 in 1977. This gave us a chance to discuss and evaluate the events of June 16. The idea of forming COSAS grew from this. In fact, originally, we were thinking of organising a political organisation".  
(15)

The idea of a national political organisation was a reflection of two things: student activists felt the need for an organisation that would make up for the shortcomings of both the SSRC, SSL and SASM.

Reminiscing about pre-launch discussions on the form of the envisaged organisation, Nomi Mogase, later elected as one of the national leaders in 1979, says the predominant feeling was that:

"It had to be different from other organisations both in its commitment and aims to carry forward the education struggle on a long-term basis, unlike organisations like the SSRC and SSL, which had emerged in response to circumstances". (16)

The idea of a national political organisation was also a reflection of the fact that, on ideological and organisational grounds, AZAPO was not appealing to student activists. (17)

On the advice of ANC internal leadership, however, the activists were persuaded to form a student organisation instead, although one with a clear (if publically unacknowledged) political purpose and allegiance to the ANC (18).

One such leader, who was to maintain links with COSAS, was Joe Gqabi, one of the Robben Island prison veterans who had been instrumental in reactivating the ANC's underground presence and establishing its links with the SSRC (19).

Gqabi's links with the 1976 student leaders are clear from the evidence in trials of the aftermath of the 1976 revolt. In particular, the famous "Pretoria 12" or State versus Sexwale (1977-78) (20).

According to Baby Tjawa, an ex-student activist involved in COSAS's formation, Gqabi was influential in the emergence of COSAS, which he saw as extending ANC influence among students and youth (21). After his assassination in 1981, Gqabi was mentioned in special tribute at the ANC's

consultative conference in Zambia in 1985 "for the seeds he planted among the youth of Soweto in 1976 and in subsequent years". (22)

Processes leading to the launch of COSAS included countrywide consultations to canvass student views, as well as the support of political notables in the community (23). Ironically, AZAPO members also offered support. Unaware of the Charterist nature of COSAS, AZAPO members availed their vehicles for use by COSAS's founders in preparation for the launch. (24)

Nozipho Diseko points to statements by two interviewees, Super Moloi and Nomi Mogase - who were part of the Soweto-based activists who initiated COSAS - as indicating "the fact that a lot of groundwork was done before COSAS was launched" in that activists "started touring the country in 1978, canvassing the views of students in various regions" and consulting with senior activists. Apart from the fact that Natal was unrepresented at COSAS's launch "because of fear of Inkatha intimidation", we do not know which other regions were toured or who was consulted with. It is also unclear which informal organisational networks existed in these regions.

Moreover, Diseko's claim about Natal contrasts with one report which lists Natal amongst the represented areas at the COSAS launch (25). It also contrasts with my own experience with the region, first as a "volunteer organiser"

in 1981, and then as an official full-time national organiser in 1982-83.

Although concern about Inkatha was ever-present, there was enthusiasm to join COSAS and to expand it regionally among school students. At the launch, however, most participants were from Transvaal, especially Soweto and most were volunteers rather than elected regional representatives. In the case of the W. Cape, only one activist attended, and is not known to have reported back to other students in the region. (26)

### 3.6. THE LAUNCH OF COSAS

COSAS was launched at a conference held from 30 June to 1 July 1979 at Wilgespruit, near Roodepoort (27). Participants numbered not more than sixty. Dominating the discussions were questions of the name of the new organisation, and hence its ideology and scope of operation, membership and issues it would take up.

During these discussions diverse ideological views emerged. The majority were sympathetic to the ANC and the Freedom Charter, while a small group articulated BC orientation. On the question of a name, ANC sympathisers insisted that it should include the word "congress", while BC supporters proposed the Venda name "Khuvhangano" (Union) or alternatively, a name including "Azania". Ultimately, after a vote, the name COSAS was adopted.

On ideology, although the majority of participants were sympathetic to the non-racialism of the Freedom Charter, the Charter itself was not formally adopted until the next year and the policy of non-racialism was only included in the constitution at the third annual congress in 1983. It is often assumed that COSAS's non-racial policy and Charter adoption was the original position. However, initially there was a self-consciousness within COSAS not to alienate former SASM members still loyal to the BC tradition. Lobbying for non-racialism took place on an inter-personal level. (28)

A much debated issue was the question of constituency. Given that almost half the attendants were not school-goers, there was a strong view to include this sector in the membership. Moreover, many of them still saw themselves as students given that their schooling was interrupted during the 1976 uprisings.

Present were also some university students and ex-SASO members who hoped to find a home within the new organisation. After prolonged debate, it was decided to restrict COSAS membership to school students, with the compromise that a committee be set up to investigate a broader youth organisation. This committee included Monde Mditshwa, interviewed for this thesis, and was named the Youth Coordinating Committee (YOCOCO). Despite its restricted membership, it was decided that COSAS would not only restrict itself to school-based concerns. Finally, the

conference decided that the urgent task would be to reach the many areas unrepresented at the launch.

In the subsequent evolution of COSAS, three distinct phases can be observed: 1979-81, then 1982-83, and finally 1984-85. I will now focus on each of these in turn, before tackling the more thematic issues around the nature of COSAS.

## CHAPTER THREE

1. For accounts of these events, see Alan Brooks and Jeremy Brickhill, Whirlwind Before the Storm (IDAF, London, 1980); Baruch Hirson, Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt: The Roots of a Revolution? (Zed Press, London 1979); John Kane-Berman, Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction, (Ravan Press, Jhb 1978)

2. Hyslop, op cit p 183

3. Kane-Berman, op cit p 219

4. This recapitulation is drawn from sources in note 1, including Archie Mafeje, "Soweto and its Aftermath", in Martin Murray (ed), South African Capitalism and Black Political Opposition (Schenkman, Cambridge, 1982), John Pampallis, Foundations of the New South Africa (Maskew Miller, Cape Town, 1991) and Anonymous, "Black Education and Resistance" in WIP, 13, July 1980

5. Hirson, op cit, and Brooks and Brickhill, op cit; Tom Lodge, "Black Politics in SA since 1945"

6. Hirson ibid

7. ibid

8. Mafeje, op cit p 742

9. Hirson op cit p 201

10. The term "Charterist" has historic origins in the late 1950s in the ideological controversy within the ANC over adoption of the Freedom Charter. The term was used by Africanists, who subsequently became the PAC, to describe supporters of the Charter in the ANC. In the 1980s it was adopted by BC groups and used in a pejorative sense against those who identified with it.

11. Seekings (1990), op cit pp 179-184

12. ibid p 183

13. Tom Lodge, op cit

14. Author's conversation with Jabu Ngwenya whose Charterist inclinations led him and others to initiate COSAS (5/1/92, Johannesburg). Also interview with Monde Mditswa (3/1/92, Jhb)

15. Quoted in Nozipho Diseko, op cit, pp 4-5

16. Quoted in ibid



17. Author's interview with Monde Mditshwa
18. Seekings (1990), op cit; interviews with E. Mogale and L. Ntlokoa p 182; also see Julie Frederickse (1991), op cit, interview with Wantu Zenzile, second COSAS president, pp 166-8. Also f.n. 13
19. Lodge, op cit, p 341
20. Hirson op cit p 205. I am indebted to Jeremy Seekings for highlighting the possibility that Joe Gqabi may have had links with COSAS's formation.
21. Telephone interview with the author (11/12/91)
22. see Political Report of the ANC NEC to the National Consultative Conference, Kabwe, Zambia, June 1985
23. Nozipho Diseko's, op cit, interviews with Super Moloi and Nomi Mogase.
24. Author's interview with Jabu Ngwenya and Monde Mditshwa
25. Race Relations Survey, 1979, South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), p 500
26. Author's interview with Shepherd Mati, later the third COSAS president (6/12/91, Cape Town)
27. M. Mditshwa interview. The rest of this paragraph is based on this interview.
28. see Frederickse (1991), op cit, p 182, and Carter, op cit, p 122, on AYCO/COSAS activity in Alexandra in 1989. I did not clarify this issue with my interviewee.

CHAPTER FOUR : "THE EDUCATION STRUGGLE OR THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE?" - THE EMERGENCE OF COSAS'S DUAL CHARACTER 1979-81

At the launch conference of COSAS, a constitution was adopted, stating its aims as being, inter alia: "to normalise the relationship between students and teachers, to create a spirit of trust, responsibility and creative companionship among students, to strive for an education for all that is dynamic, free and compulsory for the betterment of society, to involve [COSAS members] practically in projects contributing to these aspirations; and impress on students the necessity of being involved in the attainment of these aims even after completing their studies". (1)

4.1. COSAS AND THE EDUCATION STRUGGLE

In general, the founders of COSAS sought to revive the student movement of 1976. They aimed at harnessing the massive politicisation of that period and in a "systematic way...to engage [the students] in the education struggle on a sustained and organised basis". (2) As Super Moloi, COSAS co-founder member, puts it: "The idea to form COSAS was to keep the locomotive of the education struggle moving". (3)

Moreover, COSAS's aims of normalising relations between students, parents and teachers was indicative of a strategy different from the vanguardist role of the students in 1976. Announcing COSAS's formation to the press, Ephraim Mogale, the first president, explained that COSAS was formed to

"meet the needs and aspirations of the post-1976 situation".  
(4)

However, until its second national conference in 1982, COSAS had no visible impact on the education struggle. This was due to mutually reinforcing factors: the effects of state's suppression of the 1976 revolts; state repression of COSAS; COSAS's organisational weakness, and the influence of the broader political context during this period. Thus, COSAS orientated itself toward overtly political issues, rather than educational ones.

However, in practice the distinction between national political struggle and the education struggle is not clear - as my dualism thesis will attest - education in South Africa is a highly politicised issue. Thus, education-based resistance is clearly of a political nature and those students who have participated in one phase of resistance will, in the next, display a higher level of political awareness. This is the process referred to by Love and Sederberg as "cognitive liberation":

"The extent to which people take advantage of the opportunities [of resistance] available to them partly depends on their state of 'cognitive liberation'; that is, subjective meanings they attach to their situation. Most fundamentally, this entails a belief that resistance is possible. Obviously a virtuous (or vicious) cycle might be created, in that the successful organisation of resistance

activities contributes to the growth of cognitive liberation leading to further support for the organisation".

Thus, COSAS's founders held the belief that resistance must not only include education, but apartheid in general. Most importantly, the educational and political struggles became one - referred to generally as "the struggle" or "umzabalazo".

The broader student movement, during this period, was in disarray as a result of state repression. By the time of COSAS's formation in 1979, an atmosphere of fear and intimidation prevailed in township schools. This was reinforced by the imposition of tight discipline by school authorities, now including some white officials drawn from the army.

Regular army patrols at schools were common, thus making it impossible for COSAS to mobilise schools as centres of organisational activity. Thus, when the 1980 school boycotts erupted, it was led predominantly by Coloured and Indian students. When the boycott was later joined by African students, there was relative quiet in the Transvaal and PWV area.

Prominent Soweto ex-teacher, Fanyana Mazibuko, attributes this relative quiet to the fact that during the 1976 revolts they "saw real bloodshed [and] you cannot remove that from the minds of 13 year olds". (5)

On the whole COSAS had no real impact on the education struggle at this time, and in the boycotts themselves played

a limited role, with the exception of a few areas such as Port Elizabeth (6). Not only did the educational terrain of struggle pose difficult problems for COSAS, but this was further aggravated by state repression on the organisation. By the end of 1979, almost the entire national executive committee (NEC), and some of its cadreship, were in detention.

This, and the narrow base on which it was formed, contributed to its organisational weakness. COSAS's influence was really only evident in the Transvaal (PWV) and E.Cape. With most of its officials in detention, and its other membership in exile, COSAS was virtually decimated by the time of its first anniversary.

However, a fresh infusion of leadership and cadreship from the 1980 boycotts helped to save the organisation. Its sustenance was also due to AZASO activists who, despite their BC origins, identified with the "Charterist" orientation of COSAS. At this time, AZASO was not yet affected by police repression to the same extent as COSAS.

Generally then, the reduced impact that COSAS had on the education struggle and the 1980 school boycotts was due to the post-1976 demobilisation of the student movement, state repression of COSAS, and its inherent organisational weakness. As we shall see, however, it was despite this weakness that COSAS's existence was important, and that the boycotts themselves greatly influenced the organisation.

#### 4.2. COSAS AND THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE

On the whole, the activities in which COSAS engaged in the two years following its launch have no direct relevance to the formal aims set out by the organisation. During this time, COSAS was orientated toward an explicit political role, reflecting the influence of the national political context of the time.

As aforementioned, the central feature of the climate during 1978-80 was a revival of national political opposition, thanks to the 1976 revolts. ANC-inclined "Charterist" tendency ascended and marked ideological realignments in resistance circles. COSAS was the first organisation to adopt the Freedom Charter, and was followed by many organisations during this period.

Where branches existed, COSAS involved themselves with community issues like bus-fares and rents, as well as participating in the organisation of commemoration services (to mark important dates in the struggle) and of funerals of activists (7). For example, in 1980 COSAS was involved in the unveiling of the tombstone of Solomon Mahlangu, an ANC guerilla hanged by the state in 1979.

COSAS also helped to organise, and sometimes initiated, the Charterist-led campaigns which dominated political activity during this time. These included campaigns to mark the centenary of the battle of Isandhlwana in 1979, the 25th anniversary of the Freedom Charter in 1980, the Free Mandela campaign of the same year, and the campaign against the

state's celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the "Republic" in 1981 and were concentrated in the key COSAS areas - the PWV and E.Cape.

Nozipho Diseko correctly observes that "when COSAS was formed...its primary purpose was to politicise the student population in a systematic way in order to engage them in the educational struggle on a sustained and organised basis". She, however, attempts to reconcile this original COSAS aim with its subsequent orientation by suggesting that "at first, the strategy adopted by COSAS between 1979 and 1982...focussed primarily on drawing (the students') attention and support to the community issues and the broader struggle to end apartheid". (8)

I contest this argument as an explanation of COSAS's orientation between 1979 and 1982. I would argue that COSAS's tendency to focus on issues not directly education-related was not purely the result of a conscious choice but was mainly the outcome of the objective circumstances in which COSAS found itself. It also reflected how COSAS activists understood their role, given the "cognitive liberation" imparted on them by the experiences of 1976. In this context, the role played by the ANC both generally and in its relationship to COSAS is crucial.

#### 4.2.1. COSAS : "THE ANC IN STUDENTS' HEADS?"

The formation of COSAS was also the product of the ANC's efforts to foster the re-emergence of a resistance movement

inspired by the Freedom Charter. Through links established between the ANC and student activists in the post-1976 period, it was able to influence the formation and direction of COSAS.

As aforementioned, many COSAS activists were members of ANC underground structures. According to Jeremy Seeking, these ANC-linked activists functioned as "behind the scenes" leaders of COSAS, whose presence was always felt, even if their identities were not known. This was expressed through the term "the family", which was the COSAS code to refer to these ANC-linked activists. (9)

This ANC-COSAS link became known to the Special Branch of the South African Police, who came into possession of an ANC letter addressed to COSAS from their Swaziland office. The subsequent swoop on COSAS leadership followed the discovery of this letter which fostered the view amongst the security police that COSAS was an ANC initiative. What was not realised by the security police until their interrogations of COSAS activists, was that not all members belonged to the "family". As Monde Mditshwa comments:

"I mean like the SB (Special Branch) in our detention in 1979 up to 1980, in all those five months, this was the issue, whether we were acting on the instructions of the ANC. For instance, they would ask 'why were you asked to co-ordinate', 'why were you elected into committees or commissions'...It was rather strange that the system (ie the SB) picked up all the people - 18 altogether throughout the



country - who were central in the formation of COSAS...The system knew fairly well what was going on. I mean they were not fishing in the dark, they knew that it was the ANC that was behind COSAS. But what they were trying to establish is what role who played, and whether people knew consciously that COSAS was, as they called it, 'the baby of the ANC'. Because it was crucial if they were going to be able to come up with a big case against the key people in COSAS". (10)

As it turned out, the state only managed to build a case against Ephraim Mogale, while other COSAS detainees were released. Mogale was subsequently jailed for eight years as an ANC member who had organised youth, established a discussion group called the Communist Advance Movement, and recruited people for military training (11).

However, the state's suspicions about ANC-COSAS links remained until it was finally banned in 1985. In July 1980, there were already fears of banning, when the Minister of Police accused COSAS of "playing with fire" by furthering the aims of banned organisations or by being directly inspired or financed by the ANC. (12)

More overtly, COSAS's links with the ANC were expressed by its support of those campaigns already mentioned under 4.2, and also to the anti-South African Indian Council campaigns of 1981. Significantly, as the ANC propagated "Unity in Action" as its theme for 1982, so COSAS adopted the theme "Student-Worker Action" in the same year. The link was evident, yet opaque (13). Monde Mditshwa describes how

ANC-linked COSAS activists brought ANC influence within COSAS:

"When you went as an ANC cadre, you couldn't say to people 'look, I am acting on behalf of the ANC'... to try and woo more support [for a particular issue] or take a short cut. People could have done that; people could have been irresponsible enough to say 'this is an ANC initiative' or 'this is ANC-sponsored' to take a short-cut; and then it would make it easier for [them] and people would support it sooner. But because activists were disciplined, they would rather try and convince people, try and show why it was important. And so it was, with the formation of COSAS". (14)

Thus, insofar as the ANC inspired COSAS's formation, the role it envisaged for it was to contribute to the general revival of political opposition based on the Freedom Charter.

The foregoing should not be construed as portraying COSAS as a front of the ANC in the conspiratorial manner fostered by the security police. What is suggested is that COSAS was the closest to the general influence of the ANC within the country.

Indeed, there was much indigenous initiative and innovation in many of COSAS's activities. Also, as aforementioned, not all members were aware of the links that others held with the ANC as Jackie Jolobe comments:

"I was arrested because I was on the national executive of COSAS and it was believed that COSAS was a front of the

ANC - which was not true. COSAS was a student movement and happened to be having very clear political directives, aspiring to a new, democratic South Africa, and it so happened that its constitution, its beliefs, its aspirations were those of the ANC".

In response to the question of whether COSAS had to appear as not having links with the ANC, Jolobe replies: "You know, COSAS was formed under very difficult conditions. It was after two years of the system having banned all organisations, schools not operating very properly. The enemy immediately felt that this was the ANC is students' heads. With armed activities of the ANC immediately after the 1976 uprisings, the students themselves felt that there is no other alternative to this apartheid government but the ANC". (15)

#### 4.2.2. COSAS AND THE VACUUM IN NATIONAL POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

The objective national political context also influenced the strategic direction of COSAS. Seekings, characterising the context of the time, points out that "notwithstanding the revival of the Charterist movement, during 1980-82, there was no coherent or integrated national political movement operating above ground within the country. The Charterist movement was not well-integrated, and lacked any public regional or national leadership". (16)

COSAS activists occupied this vacuum as well as working in other areas of resistance, including the independent trade unions. A typical case of this multi-faceted involvement is Jabu Ngwenya, who, during this time was involved in the formation of AZAPO, COSAS, the Soweto Civic Association, the General and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU) and, in 1983, in the formation of the UDF, whilst being an ANC underground member. (17)

Because of the narrow base on which many organisations were founded, there was a tendency for leadership and membership of Charterist groups to overlap. Thus, COSAS's original decision to limit its membership to school students was not rigidly enforced, resulting in its members and even leadership being drawn from other youth sectors. In turn, this tended to bias orientation toward non-schooling issues.

In as much as the generalist political orientation of COSAS derived from the context into which it emerged, it also reflected the role as understood by its activists - as being committed to the broader struggle rather than only the education struggle.

In Carter's study of the activities of AYCO/COSAS activists in Alexandra between 1983-85, one person defined an activist as "someone who identifies himself with the problems of the people" (18).

Regarding COSAS founders (and its orientation during 1979-82), Shepherd Mati, president from 1982, attributes their approach to what he calls a "hangover" from the 1976

experience. It was even during 1976 that students took up community issues such as blocking rent increases and forcing the abolition of the Urban Bantu Council.

Monde Mditshwa's reflections on the influence of these experiences on COSAS are worth quoting:

"...at that stage [of COSAS's formation], there was a lot of anger. And, in fact, the slogan of 'Liberation Now, Certificates Later' was starting to develop (19)...For instance, within COSAS itself, there would be elements who were strongly advocating that going back into the school was a waste of time [because] we'd be fed poison, [and that] maybe the school shouldn't be the area of operation, but it [COSAS] should be taken outside of school bounds. So there was that kind of feeling...also taken into account was that other organisations were banned [in Oct 1977]. There were only two that were visible : AZAPO, formed in 1978, and COSAS. You see, COSAS had such a massive responsibility because people who were in COSAS felt that much more was expected of them, given the ideological position that was adopted at the launch. And given that there is AZAPO who are seen as useless...there was a feeling that COSAS cannot just busy itself only with educational issues, there were other issues of equal importance". (20)

#### 4.3. COSAS AND AZAPO : IDEOLOGICAL COMPETITION

As already mentioned in Chapter Three, COSAS was also deeply involved in debates characterising the ideological

realignments of 1978-80. The two key developments precipitating the debates were the re-emergence of the Freedom Charter on the one hand, and the formation of AZAPO in 1978.

AZAPO's formation as a BC organisation challenged those activists who identified with the Charterist movement and sought to make it a basis of political revival. These activists were central in the formation of COSAS. In addition to dissatisfaction with AZAPO's BC trend, COSAS activists questioned the mandate of AZAPO's founders. COSAS was represented at AZAPO's inaugural conference in Sept 1979 (21), as Monde Mditshwa reflects:

"...the very formation of AZAPO was criticised at that stage. There was a lot of debate about whether AZAPO should have been formed in the first place. So COSAS was representing the other school of thought, that is ideologically." (22)

During this period COSAS activists were interested in the internal leadership processes of AZAPO and may have influenced the election of Curtis Nkondo, who was sympathetic to the Freedom Charter, as AZAPO president in 1979. When AZAPO suspended Nkondo for allegedly having violated "protocol" and its non-collaboration principle, COSAS, AZASO and the black journalist body WASA condemned AZAPO and demanded Nkondo's unconditional reinstatement (23). Leading up to his suspension, Nkondo had consulted

with Helen Suzman, a prominent MP, to secure the release of his brother, an ANC member.

AZAPO's suspension of NKondo, and COSAS's reaction were indicative of on-going ideological debate, which included the issue of the relationship of black political organisations to white liberal and white leftist groups, particularly NUSAS. At any rate, the Suzman-issue may have come as an opportunity for B.C. die-hards to rid AZAPO of NKondo and thus keep it firmly B.C.

NKondo's suspension had repercussions not anticipated by those who conducted the B.C. purge. For one thing, it emphasised the lines of ideological fissure and precipitated antagonistic competition between B.C. and Charterist adherents. For another, it set off an internal ideological polarization within AZASO between those who sympathised with NKondo and those who affirmed the suspension. AZASO's formation had been sponsored by AZAPO, both as a counter to COSAS and as AZAPO's student wing. However in the event that Charterists were in a dominant position within AZASO, the latter increasingly distanced itself from AZAPO. Moreover, COSAS activists had already begun wooing AZASO into the Charterist camp. AZASO's first president, Tom Nkoana, was a Charterist convert who, together with other key activists, had close ties with COSAS.

A split finally occurred within AZASO in 1981 at its General Students Council where the issue of its proposed adoption of the Freedom Charter was put to a vote. On losing the vote, B.C. adherents broke away and later formed the Azanian Student Movement (ASASM) in 1983.

In 1981, COSAS and AZASO attacked AZAPO in a press statement, accusing it and other BC bodies of being reactionary and linked to United States Multinational and the CIA. In the subsequent period, the competition between Charterist organisations and BC groups was often played out in public forums, especially at the annual commemorations of June 16.

At times, the competition would threaten conflict, except for the occasional intervention of prominent clerics like Desmond Tutu, the then Secretary-General of the South African Council of Churches. With the forming of AZASM, the competition shifted to schools and universities where violence was included.

In this chapter, I have sought to explain the orientation of COSAS between 1979 and 1982. I have shown that in spite of the strategic decision made at COSAS's launch, COSAS activists prioritised national political issues over the education struggle. At moments during this period COSAS occupied the political centre-stage, providing a pivot for political activity.

However, this profile as a leading Charterist movement was out of proportion with its organisational strength. This



I have attributed to a combination of factors which have already been mentioned. Indeed it is precisely its contribution to the creation of a political climate in which the ANC re-emerged as a leading liberation movement which constitutes COSAS's major achievement in this period.

However, these achievements were at the expense of the education struggle. Firstly, COSAS failed to develop a coherent programmatic approach to the education struggle and to build a base amongst students. Secondly, the explicitly political activities of COSAS rendered it vulnerable to state repression which weakened it organisationally.

While not validating this approach, in the repressive climate of the time, other organisations, such as trade union federations, FOSATU, adopted a "survivalist" strategy of being apolitical, concentrating on factory-based structures.

Due to its organisational weakness, COSAS could not lend leadership and co-ordination to the 1980-81 school boycotts which proceeded in spite of it. However, it did eventually link up with these student struggles and this was decisive for its development thereafter. In the next chapter, I examine COSAS's strategic re-orientation.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

1. cited in Race Relations Survey, SAIRR, 1979, p 500
2. Diseko, op cit, p 4
3. Quoted in ibid
4. see f.n. 1
5. Race Relations News, July 1980, (SAIRR). Fanyana Mazibuko is one of the teachers involved who walked out in solidarity with students during the 1976 uprisings. Curtis Nkondo led the walk-out.
6. see RRS, 1980
7. ibid
8. Diseko, op cit, pp 4-6
9. Interview with Monde Mditshwa 5/1/92. Also from personal experience.
10. ibid interview
11. RRS, 1980. Also see J. Frederickse South Africa, A Different Kind of War (Ravan Press, 1986, p 186)
12. RRS, 1980, p 58
13. I have borrowed the term "opaque" from Charles Carter, op cit, who drew it from EP Thompson The Making of the English Working Class (Great Britain, 1963) and applies it to the activities of COSAS and AYCO in Alexandra.
14. Interview with author, op cit
15. quoted in Frederickse (1990), op cit, p 186
16. Seekings (1990), op cit, p 184
17. Ngwenya is a friend and "comrade" of the author. During this period, he was repeatedly detained and linked to many ANC trials, including those of Cedric Mayson and Barbara Hogan. Presently, he is an official of the SA Musicians Alliance.
18. Carter, op cit, p 112
19. The similarity of this slogan to "Liberation Before Education" (the slogan of the 1984-86 student/youth revolt) is striking.

20. interview, op cit

21. RRS, 1979, p 50

22. interview, op cit

23. RRS, 1980, p 56

## CHAPTER FIVE : "AT THE LEVEL OF OUR FELLOW STUDENTS"

### THE STRATEGIC RE-ORIENTATION OF COSAS

1982-83

This period marked a definite shift of focus for COSAS, beginning in 1981 and being consolidated after its 2nd Congress in Cape Town. Thus, the focus was shifted more toward education, the student movement and building organisation.

While this owed much to COSAS's role in the 1980 boycotts, it also reflected the change in the political context of the time - in addition to sporadic student protests, local and national issues were being taken up by civic organisations and the UDF.

The alliance structure of the UDF illustrated the fact that each site of struggle had its own activist organisations. COSAS's affiliation to the UDF helped to give it validation and to clarify its role in the relationship between the national and the education struggles.

#### 5.1. COSAS AND THE 1980 SCHOOL BOYCOTTS

The boycotts began in February 1980 in the Coloured schools of the W. Cape, soon spreading to other parts of the country and subsequently to DET schools, with the PWV being largely unaffected. (1)

Grievances underlying the boycott included objection to SADF national servicemen teaching in township schools, poor

infrastructure and lack of text books, with an overall demand for "equal, non-racial and democratic" education.

The boycotts took place in an era of growing labour action, bus boycotts and rent protest. Students emphasised the forging of links with workers, parents and teachers, and promoted consumer boycotts in support of strikes at Wilson Rowntree amongst others. (2)

The W. Cape boycott was notable for the level of political awareness and organisation amongst students. The media issued by the co-ordinating committee of the W. Cape boycotts attacked the class basis of education and its role in buttressing exploitation and oppression.

At the start of the boycotts, the entire COSAS leadership was in detention or exile and thus the organisation had no impact in inciting the action, except for some key activists in certain regions. (3)

Attempting to move the boycotts to Soweto, COSAS called for a protest against school fees and the enforcement of school uniforms (4). The failure of the boycott to materialise is indicative of the organisational weakness of COSAS in this area.

During the boycott COSAS's role varied regionally. In Port Elizabeth, for example, the role was organisational, albeit in the guise of the Port Elizabeth Student Council - a tactic used by COSAS given the level of state repression at this time. (5)

Although its role was minimal during the boycotts, it did make strategic interventions. As the boycotts spread countrywide, there was identified a need for a national co-ordinating structure. Moreover, it was identified that the boycotts were a short-term tactic which needed to be incorporated into on-going organisation (6). In this context, COSAS was seen as adding a national dimension to the student struggle.

On the question of returning to school, COSAS hosted a national consultative conference at which it was decided that students should return to classes. It was in this way that COSAS managed to draw student leadership and membership, giving the organisation the boost needed to consolidate its structures.

Significantly, COSAS made organisational inroads into the Coloured and Indian constituencies where it had hitherto been unrepresented. However, up until its banning, this base remained narrow, with the exception of the W. Cape. Even here, there was resistance to the Charterist trend of COSAS, students and teachers being more inclined to the ultra-leftwing groups of the now defunct New Unity Movement.

The boycotts also helped to reorientate COSAS toward the issue of education. In this regard, COSAS elaborated on the advances made by the boycotts, among these being: the relationship of student organisations with other struggle groups, the importance of a mass base, the education struggle as part of the broader struggle, the tactic of

boycotts, democracy and non-racialism as long-term goals, and the need to formulate future alternatives for the education system. (8)

The motto "Each One Teach One" was adopted by COSAS, as well as a logo depicting two students reading from the same book. The motto draws from the work of Latin American popular educationalist Paolo Friere, regarded as the intellectual inspiration behind alternatives to Bantu Education. (9)

## 5.2. THE 1982 SECOND COSAS CONGRESS AND AFTER

It was against this background that the 2nd Congress was held in Cape Town in May 1982. It was attended by 200 participants from 28 branches, as well as by observers from NUSAS, AZASO, trade unions and community organisations. (10)

As such, many of the W. Cape participants were not delegates. Activists from African townships were eager to be incorporated, as up until then COSAS existed in only two Coloured areas - Paarl and Ravensmead.

This issue of status of participants was not limited to the W. Cape. Many of the branches had not yet been fully constituted. In most cases these consisted of volunteers who had yet to formalise their structures.

This congress is significant as the place in which COSAS was to define itself and the role it was to play. Among the policy decisions made was the reaffirmation of the commitment to non-racialism, and the stress of COSAS as a

student organisation committed to "compulsory, free and democratic education" (11). It was also decided that COSAS membership should be strictly limited to full-time students.

On the issue of white schools, it was felt that their issues were somewhat different and because of the Prohibition of Political Interference Act, which outlawed racially-mixed organisations, COSAS was not permitted to admit white members.

A steering committee was set up to look at the feasibility of a national organisation to accommodate non-schooling and school-leaving COSAS members. The Congress adopted the "Student-Worker Action" theme for 1982/3 and a national executive committee was formed with Shepherd Mati as president.

From this point, COSAS prioritised the setting up of structures at all levels, and numbers grew steadily, with the stress on the election of office-bearers rather than ad hoc groups. By August 1983 there were 44 branches.

By the time of the 3rd Congress in December 1983, although there were now 48 branches, many of these were still based outside of township schools - it was difficult to hold meetings on the premises and school authorities were resistant to COSAS (12). Thus, branch meetings were erratic and some branches dissolved through a lack of programme. On a grassroots level, branches relied on centralised input from the national leadership and gatherings.



During 1983, building organisation was thus prioritised. In this regard, COSAS benefitted from links with NUSAS and SASPU, as well as CRIC (Community Resources and Information Centre) and MARS (Media and Resources Services) in the production of a regular national newsletter intended to help the branches establish themselves. Although most articles were written by national leadership, branches were urged to contribute their experiences. COSAS activities were also covered in other student media (esp SASPU) and CRIC ran skills workshops.

COSAS internal functioning stressed democracy, participation, accountability and mandate, and election of leadership for building organisation, and branches were encouraged to "use their own initiative" (13). Useful activities suggested included workshops and seminars, extra-tuition classes, summer and winter schools and distribution of COSAS media (14). Cape Town and Alexandra proved to be the most successful in this regard, drawing many students, but the actual success of the newsletter is difficult to determine.

### 5.3. ORGANISATIONAL PROBLEMS

From 1983 to 1984, COSAS continued to experience organisational problems. These were discussed at the 1983 Congress and included finance, opposition of parents to COSAS, poor participation by women, state intimidation,

Inkatha harassment in Natal and difficulties in the homelands. (15)

In a Transvaal meeting the following April, the following weaknesses were identified:

"(a) Lack of direction and co-ordinating (sic) on the issues to [be] taken [by] branches; (b) Lack of constant communication between branches and the Executive; (c) Ideological problem of AZASM; (d) Venue; (e) Lack of finance; (f) Lack of resources, those who have any, misused them" (16)

Repression and harassment was a constant problem, which constantly hindered COSAS's work. Apart from detention and exile, some leadership disappeared as was the case of Siphiso Mtimkulu who disappeared in 1982 after bringing a legal suit against the state for allegedly poisoning him whilst in detention. He has since not been found.

In the homelands, COSAS faced the greatest opposition. The inroads made by COSAS into Natal invited vicious opposition from Chief Minister Buthelezi, Inkatha and its youth brigade. In a speech, Buthelezi attacks COSAS as being "youth gone mad", stating that "in failing they will drag your children down with them and destroy the thing that you have strived for" (17). Hence, COSAS was banned in Kwazulu schools.

In Ciskei, by the end of September 1983, almost the entire national executive was in detention and COSAS was described by Lennox Sebe as "a ruthless organisation" (18).

In Transkei, COSAS was banned in Oct 1984, along with AZASO and the UDF. (19)

#### 5.4. COSAS AND THE INCIPIENT CRISIS IN EDUCATION, 1983

In the second half of 1983, the incidence of sporadic boycotts in schools and black tertiary institutions increased, indicative of an incipient education crisis which was to climax between 1984 and 1985.

While in principle COSAS had experienced a shift in focus, many of its branches still prioritised broader issues, and thus COSAS was concerned about the role it was to play in this crisis. This was expressed in the first national COSAS newsletter of March/April 1983:

"What we find is that sometimes students do not participate in our organisations. This is because we do not address ourselves to the matters affecting us in our schools. We shift emphasis from our problems eg the need for SRCs into community issues, eg rent increases so that we ask this question: Why do we bother to use our energies, time and money and make such sacrifices if few students become involved. This necessitates us to be at the level of understanding of our fellow students and organise them around issues affecting them". (20)

As the boycotts grew, COSAS's organisational weakness became a central issue. In assessment, it was found at the 1983 Congress that COSAS "wasn't fully prepared to carry out

the support and direction the boycott situation required" (21).

Despite organisation hurdles, COSAS paid special attention to monitoring the student boycotts and developing their education strategy. It was recognised that student action was a manifestation not only of the education crisis, but of the political context in general. The second COSAS national newsletter stated:

"A deep crisis exists in the education system that means sharp tension exists between students and authorities imposing inferior and oppressive education. At all levels, and in all parts of the country, students have protested against their education. Harsh discipline, authoritarian headmasters, refused to recognise student rights to observe days commemorating past struggles, have all brought students together to collectively act on their grievances. At the same time as sham reforms are being imposed to divide the people and entrench apartheid and exploitation, repression is being applied to the schools to attempt to crush student struggles. It was also quite clear that some of these...events were violent because of the frustration of students". (22)

At the 1983 Congress, COSAS identified the following as problems underlying the education crisis: age restriction, corporal punishment, overcrowded classrooms, lack of qualified teachers, textbook shortages, co-option through Junior Community Councils (23), enforcement of uniforms,

high fees, leakage of exam papers, drunkenness during school hours, expulsions and threats by principals, the prefect system and lack of facilities. (24)

It was stressed that "these have to be linked to the problem of lack of proper representation and consultation between and amongst students, teachers and parents, and between people and the government".

A resolution was adopted at the Congress regarding the education crisis and COSAS's hitherto inadequate response to it, pledging "to commit ourselves to actively increase (sic) our participation in taking up problems and issues in the field of education locally and nationally in the coming year" and to "strive for unity in action of the democratic forces around the theme of education, particularly the Education Charter Campaign" (25). The theme for 1984 was to be "United Action for Democratic Education".

During this period COSAS initiated education campaigns around the age-limit issue, esp in Soweto and the E. Cape. This was an issue which affected COSAS in that it prevented its members (who were generally over the required limit of 20 years) from taking campaigns into the schools, hence being forced to terminate their membership. The age-limit issue was to win increasing appeal with students broadly.

## 5.5. DEVELOPING STRATEGIES AND TACTICS FOR THE EDUCATION STRUGGLE

COSAS was at pains, during this time, to arm students with strategies, tactics and ideology as a response to the crisis, drawing on the advances made during the boycotts of 1980. The 2nd COSAS newsletter places current protests within the context of past student struggles in an article entitled "A Look at Past School Boycotts", in the hope of providing some guidelines for those involved in present and future boycotts of a similar nature.

COSAS sought to promote an understanding of strategy amongst students, including a comprehension of the differences between short-term demands, as being specific and within a certain time-frame, and long-term demands, being broader and for the achievement of a higher political goal. These analyses, featured in the newsletter, were for the aim of organisational consolidation as a priority.

As aforementioned, the COSAS theme for 1982/83 was "Student-Worker Action" hence emphasising the student link with the broader community - a belief that remained in 1984, despite the shift in focus. As the COSAS leadership argued:

"The system affects us all - our parents as workers in the factories earn low wages, prices are increasing, inflation is increasing, rents are going up. All this affects us directly - where is the money to buy uniforms, textbooks, to pay school fees, even the food we eat...The cause of the problems in different sectors is a common one -

oppression and exploitation...This is why COSAS must organise, and unite with other sectors. Because our aims are one..." (26)

These formulations are important in the understanding of COSAS's dual nature, and in the developing of an intellectual foundation for it. Practical application was to be found in COSAS's UDF affiliation, and it was decided at the 1983 Congress to encourage COSAS branch participation in UDF programmes.

The presence of the UDF and youth congresses which had emerged from COSAS's 2nd Congress, enabled COSAS to work within a more formal network of alliances based on a common embracing of the Freedom Charter. This provided resources, solidarity and assistance. As will emerge later, these links were useful in COSAS's role in the mass student protests of 1984-85. Furthermore, the relationship between COSAS, AZASO and NUSAS became more practical through joint activities.

This chapter was aimed at tracing the process of re-orientation, with COSAS's definite shift of focus and subsequent consolidation of its organisational structures and strategies so that it was able to play a more efficient role in the 1984-85 school boycotts. It is this context that an assessment of strengths and weaknesses of the organisation can be discussed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

1. SASPU National, Oct/Nov 1985
2. Frank Molteno, "1980 - Student Struggle for their Schools", CAS Communication, No 13, UCT, 1987; Linda Chisholm (1986), op cit
3. Video interviews with past COSAS leaders, Western Cape Community Video Project, Cape Town 1987; author's interview with Oupa Magashula, one of the student activists in Kimberley during the time (Dec 1991, Cape Town)
4. RRS, 1980, p 60, p 255
5. Shepherd Mati in video interview, op cit
6. M. Bot, School Boycotts 1984: The Crisis in African Education (Durban, Indicator Project, 1985) p 17
7. Desmond Abrahams and Lizo Ncokoto, ex-COSAS NEC members, in COSAS video interview.
8. SASPU National, op cit
9. Telephone interview with Baby Tjawa, Dec 1991. Friene's work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed was standard reading for the activists of this time. It has been difficult to trace influences on the motto and logo of COSAS.
10. RRS, 1982; 1983; (SAIRR)
11. Saspu National, August 1983; COSAS Congress Report, 1983
12. COSAS Congress Report, 1983
13. Saspu National interview with Shepherd Mati, vol4(5) Nov 1983
14. see f.n 12
15. ibid
16. Transvaal Regional Meeting Report, 6 April, 1984
17. RRS, 1984
18. RRS, 1983
19. RRS, 1984
20. COSAS National Newsletter, no 1, March/April 1983, quoted in Diseko, op cit, p 7. Emphasis added.



21. COSAS Congress Report, 1983
22. COSAS National Newsletter, no 2, October/November 1983
23. A scheme by township councillors aimed at legitimating the unpopular Community Councils in the eyes of the youth in particular
24. see f.n 21
25. Ibid. The Education Charter Campaign was mooted by AZASO in 1982 and initiated jointly with COSAS with the support of NUSAS. It is discussed later.
26. SASPU National interview with 1984 COSAS NEC, vol 5 (2), May 1984.

## CHAPTER SIX: "FROM AN ACTIVIST GROUP TO A MASS MOVEMENT":

### COSAS, SCHOOL BOYCOTTS AND POPULAR REVOLT,

#### 1984-1985

The beginning of 1984 saw the outbreak of renewed school boycotts, followed by a rapid escalation of the education crisis which spilled into the national political arena. COSAS successfully located itself at the helm of these boycotts and was transformed into a mass student movement. Thus, the student movement became the spearhead of national political revolt of late 1984-86.

This transformation is due to several factors: COSAS's role in the boycotts, the wider developments of UDF-led political opposition, state reaction to resistance (in particular to COSAS and UDF activities).

#### 6.1. COSAS AND THE 1984 BOYCOTTS

The 1984 boycotts involved a range of issues and demands, beginning with the poor 1983 matric results, and including the age-limit regulations, sexual abuse of students by teachers, and lack of recognition of SRCs.

The matric result issue was particularly heated, especially in Atteridgeville, where students found unmarked examination papers from the previous year (1). This fuelled already widespread suspicions that exam results, which had been poor for the third successive year, were being manipulated so as to deliberately fail students.

In response to this, COSAS's Atteridgeville branch sparked one of the fiercest boycotts of the time, resulting in the closure of six secondary schools by May.

Another boycott epicentre was Cradock in the E. Cape where headmaster and UDF leader, Matthew Goniwe was transferred from his post to Graaf-Reinet by the authorities. Cradock students boycotted and Goniwe was detained, thus adding Graaf-Reinet to the boycotts which spread rapidly, extending beyond the major urban centres.

The full extent of the boycotts is difficult to ascertain. A newspaper report in September 1984 observed that "the national scope of the boycotts...has been less obvious, because each has been triggered by an ostensibly different grievance". (2)

Though still organisationally weak in some key centres, COSAS's existing infrastructure was useful in adding a national focus to the boycotts, being increasingly drawn into co-ordination.

As indicated in previous chapters, from 1983 COSAS's priorities were around the education crisis and the building of organisation. They sought to focus students on the issue of power and control in addressing their grievances. They thus promoted the idea of SRCs and circulated a draft SRC constitution in 1983. During the 1984 boycotts this issue was central.

With the boycotts, COSAS found opportunity to implement its strategy of emphasising short-term demands as a basis

for mobilisation for long-term political aims (3). As Lulu Johnson, COSAS president in 1984 states:

"Through these [short-term demands], we are laying the basis for long-term demands. The demand for democratic SRCs is part of the process of preparing ourselves and building a future South Africa where representation will be genuine and democratic". (4)

COSAS also began to use common grievances to organise amongst the boycotting students, most of whom were coming into contact with the organisation for the first time. The first initiative was rallies held to mark a national day of solidarity with students, on 30 May 1984, initiated jointly with AZASO and with participation from NUSAS. Members demonstrated outside the DET offices in Pretoria, with placards popularising student demands. Contacts were established with leaders of the boycotters who were drawn into COSAS's strategising forums.

The context of the boycotts, in which rigid school discipline had collapsed, made it possible for COSAS to "sneak" into meetings of boycotting students in order to advance their positions thus succeeding in acting as legitimate representatives when bargaining with authorities.

During 1984, COSAS experienced unprecedented membership increases. In Transvaal alone, the number of branches grew from 17 to 25 (5). However, more than being the result of COSAS's success in building organisation, its pull on students lay in its political symbolism and its mastering of

militant discourse. In turn, COSAS experienced increased response among students. As the boycotts politicised students, COSAS's strategy, linking education to broader political issues, contributed to the transformation which took students to the forefront of the national arena from the latter part of 1984 until 1986.

COSAS's radicalism seemed to echo in the militancy adopted by students and youth. In May, when the DET relented to pressure and offered some form of representation - Pupils' Representative Councils, which included school authorities - COSAS vehemently rejected this and urged students to sustain the struggle for democratic SRCs. This uncompromising position is illustrated by the COSAS president's remark: "Students are tired of being regarded as children expected just to obey authorities". (6)

#### 6.2. COSAS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF BOYCOTTS INTO POLITICAL REVOLT

The transformation of COSAS from an activist group into a mass movement cannot be understood as being apart from the transformation of the school boycotts into the spearhead of a national political revolt in the period 1984-5 (7).

Whereas until July 1984, school boycotts concerned purely educational issues, in the subsequent period students also rallied behind wider political issues. This can be understood in terms of the influence of student struggles on the campaigns of the UDF and, linked to this, of township

residents against rents and such issues. Thus, grievances experienced by students were just aspects of general discontent within an oppressive regime (8).

In the Transvaal, for example, students were involved in the widespread mobilisation against rents in townships such as Daveyton, Tembisa and the Vaal Triangle. In the atmosphere of legitimate defiance, it became easier to mobilise students. (9)

State reaction to student protest is crucial in understanding the politicisation of the boycotts. Resistance and repression in schools followed a general pattern of police action and detentions on peaceful boycotts. This only served to spur the boycotts on, with demands for the release of fellow students. Further police action escalated the conflict and funerals and commemorations of those who died became important sites of resistance articulation. (10)

Non-schooling youth were also important. An aspect of the revival of popular organisations was the idea of organising those whose schooling had been disrupted in 1976. This idea had been adopted by COSAS's launching conference, but due to later clampdowns, it had not been followed up. At the 1982 congress it was decided that non-schooling youth were to be incorporated into a new youth structure.

As a follow-up to this, fifty youth organisations met in January 1983 where it was agreed that the formation of this organisation should begin locally. By the end of 1984, twenty locally-based youth organisations had been formed,

calling themselves "congresses" to show their Charterist allegiance.

As unemployment soared, the base for the youth congresses expanded. Following the general trend, youth congresses organised around broad issues, rather than specific ones. As such, they infused a deeper, sometimes more desperate militancy into student and community politics (11). They also formed an important base of organisations like the UDF.

As boycotts persisted, there developed an interface between student and youth activity. This was due partly to the identification with student struggle felt by most youth, since they were "victims" of the education system through high failure rates and age limits. In Alexandria, Charles Carter found an overlap between COSAS and the Alexandria Youth Congress throughout 1983-5. AYCO's organisational identity "cannot be easily separated from an evident overlap between youth congresses and school-based struggles". (12)

Jonathan Hyslop challenges the suggestion that the school movements of 1984-5 were "somehow more political and radical than those of the previous two waves of student struggles". He argues that "while student movements did become increasingly concerned with questions of national politics in 1984, their initial mobilising issues were very much education related...". For Hyslop, "a clearer difference was that the students of 1984, especially through

COSAS, had a real national organisation that could make calls to action evoking a national response". (13)

However, Hyslop fails to distinguish historically between the national context that obtained at each instance of student struggle and how they are influenced by this. Also, what matters is not the fact that political and social issues are merely raised by students, but the strategy employed. Commentators have drawn a difference between the COSAS-initiated Transvaal stayaway of 1984 with similar SSRC action of 1976. (14)

Hyslop's treatment of the cycles of student struggle obscures their historical continuities and discontinuities. Consequently, he fails to appreciate that the existence of a national body such as COSAS is not only a point of difference with past struggles but is also an advance on them.

In general, the historical evolution of COSAS entailed a generational succession of activists thus accumulating organisational experience. This process involves contradictions partly due to the rapid turnover of members. This became apparent in late 1985 as student and youth movements showed signs of degeneration after the banning of COSAS and the detention of its leaders.

COSAS's role in the politicisation of students cannot be over-emphasised. In addition to the high profile of being the national mouthpiece of the boycott movement, COSAS's network with other organisations enabled it to provide other



crucial services – the printing of pamphlets, the engaging of lawyers for the release of detainees, and the fundraising and organisation of funerals for victims of police action. Through these activities students began to embrace the dual nature of COSAS.

At the funerals of Emma Sathekge, run over by a police vehicle, and Bongani Khumalo, a Soweto COSAS exec member shot by police, COSAS arranged for rousing speakers from the UDF and other organisations. Funerals were, in a sense, used to expose students to the ideological breadth of the Charterist movement, and in this way, through COSAS, becoming part of the broad political arena (15). The experiences of those who became COSAS members during this time of mass organisation contrasted with those of earlier members.

### 6.3. COSAS AND "UNGOVERNABILITY"

In the atmosphere of defiance, student struggle intersected with community and broad struggle under the slogan of "ungovernability" in terms of resistance strategy. Earlier in 1984, the ANC had called for people to "create the conditions in which the country will become increasingly ungovernable" (16). The embracing of this slogan contributed to the radicalisation of students and youth and, in a sense, underscored the character of COSAS, especially its relationship with the ANC.

This embrace is illustrated by the joint COSAS-AZASO call for a fortnight of protest in the run up to the tricameral elections in August. While some schools and university did boycott the two weeks, most boycotted on the two election days only (17). The number of boycotting students tripled (18) as a result of Coloured and Indian participation. Estimates in the figures of African involvement in tricameral protest were between 30 000 and 75 000. (19) Thus the trend of student activity in wider issues had been established.

"Ungovernability" is also reflected in student and other activists' attitudes to the stay-aways of this time. In September, two weeks after a one-day rent protest stay-away in the Vaal Triangle, in which 31 people died, the Release Mandela Committee called for a Soweto stay-away in solidarity. While estimates of the response ranged from 35% to 65%, it was accompanied by confusion as to the duration (20). A more organised stay-away, which was held in Kwa-Thema in October, inspired the COSAS-initiated November 5th and 6th stay-away in support of student demands.

It was decided, at a COSAS-convened meeting of various organisations, that while the stay-away would be for student demands, it would also raise wider socio-economic issues. The list of demands included: democratically elected SRCs, an end to age limits, the extension of the academic year by postponing final exam dates, a decrease in rent and bus fares, the resignation of township councillors and the

withdrawal of the SADF from the townships. The reinstatement of workers fired during strike action was also a demand.

The stay-away brought near stand-still industry and schooling in S. Transvaal. Figures range from a conservative 300 000 to 800 000 workers, and 400 000 students (21). According to Wits professor Eddie Webster, who studied the history of stay-aways since 1950, this was the most successful in South African history. (22)

According to the Labour Monitoring Group, the action was "not simply the re-emergence of past forms of opposition. It marks a new phase in the history of protest against apartheid, the beginnings of united action among organised labour, students and community groups - the unions taking a leading role". (23)

The comment of ex COSAS activist Thami Mali, who chaired the stay-away committee, is representative of the triumphalism of "ungovernability": "[The stayaway] has actually shown that we can bring the machinery of this country to a standstill. We cannot go back anymore now". (24)

COSAS emerged from the stay-away strengthened and declared, in December, that students would not return to school in 1985 unless demands were met, as this would "be a betrayal to go back while many of us are still languishing in detention and the Department of Education and Training is still refusing to allow us to draw our own SRC constitution". (25)

However, the solidarity achieved among students, workers and the community in this stay-away did not occur in other regions. In Port Elizabeth, an attempt to organise similar action produced conflict with more organised groups. Threats by students to unionists were a reaction to difficulties. A stay-away was called in March without union support, generating much tension. Tensions also arose between Africans and the Coloured community, where the unions had more influence than youth organisations and who had not supported the stay-away. (26)

During 1985, student boycotts spread countrywide, affecting African schools. A feature of this activity was the ferocious confrontation with police by students and youth, occurring in key areas of the country: the cities and small towns of the E. Cape, Rand and the Vaal Triangle, urban centres of S. Transvaal, the Northern Free State and, to a limited extent, the Durban/Pietermaritzburg area.

The basis of activity was political, whilst education demands were now seen as "mobilising issues which were just a facet of a wider struggle to overturn the existing social order" (27).

Hyslop observes as a feature of the politicisation of the boycotts, the emergence of a political culture among students which was centred on expressions of allegiance to the ANC and its aims. The praise for Mandela, Tambo and Umkhonto we Sizwe, the allegiance to the Freedom Charter, the study of ANC and SACP literature, the use of mock

guerilla uniforms and guns at funerals and demonstrations were all part of the dominant culture of students. (28)

However, since Hyslop does not specifically examine COSAS in the context of the transformation of boycotts into national political struggle, COSAS's role in the transmission of the ANC-orientated boycott culture does not emerge. In this connection, Carter had remarked on the extent to which academic analysis neglects the role of students and youth in making the ANC and UDF a "lived reality". (29)\_

As students and youth discovered their own political energies through their actions, so national organisations saw them as a potential militant resource base in confrontation with the state, envisaged by the ANC as "people's war". Students and youth, for their part, increasingly conceived their roles as "young lions".

#### 6.4. COSAS AND THE SLOGAN "LIBERATION BEFORE EDUCATION": 1985

During the first half of 1985, student militancy, led by COSAS, maintained solid rejection of the DET's concession of withdrawing PRCs and offering SRCs in their place. At the beginning of the year, most students had returned to classes "under protest" while COSAS continued its campaign for democratically-elected SRCs and the withdrawal of the SAP and SADF from the townships. In some schools, students went ahead and formed SRCs (30).

Against this background, the state lashed out at the student movement and in March it was made illegal to propagate class boycotts (31). In July, a partial state of emergency was declared in E. Cape, S. Transvaal and N. Free State - hundreds of COSAS members were detained. While COSAS's organisation was affected, student mobilisation had become too powerful to be contained. Thus, contrary to the state's intentions, the state of emergency precipitated the outbreak of revolt in the W. Cape, which had previously been relatively quiet except for protests around the Tricameral parliament. (32) This development probably explains the state's decision to ban COSAS on 28 August 1985.

COSAS's banning was widely condemned by, amongst others, the United States government, UDF, NUSAS and AZASM (33). This marked the first organisational banning since 1977 and its banning of 17 black consciousness organisations. It was also the first time that the Internal Security Act was used in a banning. As with the banning of the ANC and PAC in 1960, COSAS's banning followed the declaration of a state of emergency.

The emergency and banning of COSAS failed to neutralise student action which had reached a peak. In September, the divisional commissioner of the SAP in Johannesburg blamed COSAS for the fact that the emergency regulations had no effect of "unrest". (34)

While this was so, state repression highlighted organisational weakness of student struggle at the time. As

a result of the banning and detentions, students now had to operate without their former leaders.

In this context divisive tendencies set in, posing a threat to the resistance movement well into 1986. For example, clashes began developing between boycotting students and those wishing to attend classes. Thus boycotts were no longer a tactic as COSAS always insisted, but "a test of loyalty to the revolution and a way of life" (35) emphasised in the slogan "Liberation First, Education Later".

A rift developed between students and youth, and the broader community, including teachers. Youth imposed consumer boycotts and stay-aways which were often badly organised and teachers were often targets for humiliation.(36)

COSAS's consolidation of its 150 branches was overtaken by the speed of mobilisation and student militancy, and more often than not, only a small fraction of its leadership were involved in strategising the boycotts. (37)

Another cause of divisiveness was the extent to which students single-handedly confronted education authorities and the state - attempts at involving parents were erratic. This was partly according to the view among activists of seeing UDF affiliates working in areas outside of their own as encroaching. Thus, while COSAS saw a role for workers and teachers, education was the "terrain" of students. National

leaders were not close enough to the struggle to appreciate its shortcomings within the education crisis.



## CHAPTER SIX

1. M. Bot, op cit, p 7
2. Martine Barker, "Boycotts as Widespread as in 1976", Cape Times, 29/9/84
3. Hyslop, op cit, p 192
4. SASPU Focus, vol 3(2), November 1984
5. ibid
6. ibid
7. Seekings (1990), op cit, 232-9
8. ibid, p 232; Bundy, op cit; Hyslop, op cit
9. Seekings, ibid p 233
10. Chisholm, op cit p 19
11. City Press, 20 April, 1986.
12. Carter, op cit, p 128
13. Hyslop, op cit, p 192
14. For an analysis of the 1976 SSRC stay-aways, see Anonymous "Stay-aways: Mass Strike or Demonstration" in WIP, no 25, 1983; and Glen Moss's rejoinder in WIP, 26 April 1983. For an analysis of the 1984 stay-away see Labour Monitoring Group "Report: the November Stay-Away", SA Labour Bulletin, vol 10(6), May 1985
15. Seekings, op cit, p 238
16. cited in Frederickse (1986), op cit, p 178
17. RRS, 1984 (SAIRR)
18. Frederickse (1986), p 168
19. Hyslop, op cit, p 193; M. Bot, op cit, p 1; Indicator, "A Chronology of Township Unrest", Indicator, vol 2(4) January 1985
20. Labour Monitoring Group, op cit, p 75
21. ibid p 74
22. cited in Frederickse (1986), op cit, pp 180, 191

23. Labour Monitoring Group, op cit, p 74
24. Cited in Frederickse (1986), p 180
25. RRS, 1984, SAIRR
26. Hyslop, op cit, p 194
27. ibid p 195
28. ibid
29. Carter, op cit, p 112
30. SASPU State of the Nation, Oct/Nov 1985
31. ibid
32. RRS, 1985, (SAIRR); Hyslop, op cit p 195; Bundy, op cit
33. RRS, 1985, p 387
34. ibid
35. Love and Sederberg, op cit, p 315
36. Zwelakhe Sisulu, "People's Education for People's Power" in Transformation, No 1, 1986
37. SASPU State of the Nation, Oct/Nov 1985; Hyslop, op cit, p 192
38. Hyslop, op cit p 193

## CHAPTER SEVEN: IDEOLOGY AND ALLIANCES

This chapter examines COSAS's ideology and its relationships with other sections of resistance - its relationship to the ANC and to student organisations like NUSAS and AZASO. It will conclude with an assessment of the Education Charter Campaign.

### 7.1. COSAS AND THE FREEDOM CHARTER

As aforementioned, COSAS was the product of the post-1976 era, out of which the Freedom Charter and its movement re-emerged and were informed, by COSAS.

The realignment of 1978-80 and the revival of opposition politics fostered commitment to the Charter, and its symbolism of the banned ANC (1). COSAS was the first to adopt the Charter and was therefore accorded a place of pride as the spear-head of ANC-inclined re-emergence, and as the group to popularise it during 1979-82.

Adopting the Freedom Charter implicitly committed COSAS to the principle of non-racialism. However, there had initially been no uniform clarity with regard to how COSAS was to relate to white students and white groups. In an interpretation of non-racialism, the Mamelodi COSAS branch declared to the press in 1981 that COSAS was open to all races (2), while the Port Elizabeth exec members were suspended for talking to the Progressive Federal Party. (3)

Another instance of ambivalence involved the liberal Afrikaner student group POLSTU who had actively sought links

with COSAS in 1981 and 1982. While COSAS was officially cautious about POLSTU, those members who did consort with POLSTU were disowned by COSAS.

Generally, COSAS's adoption of the Freedom Charter provided its members with clear ideals rather than an all-encompassing philosophy. However, COSAS members tended to impute to the Charter an automatic hegemony.

The sense of ideological and organisational security imparted by the Freedom Charter tended to substitute for a deeper understanding of the document. When rivalry between COSAS and AZASM developed, often threatening conflict, it became apparent that the sense of organisational and ideological security on the part of COSAS activists was largely false.

According to Oupa Magashula, an ex COSAS and AZASO member who deserted Charterism to join AZASM, the formation of AZASM involved "poaching" from COSAS and AZASO, (since AZASM was open to schools and tertiary students). However, this relationship was reciprocal. From 1984 the rivalry moved into schools and became violent causing state intervention and the use of vigilantes to create so-called "black-on-black" violence. COSAS lost more lives than any other organisation. (4)

As aforementioned, ideological differences were experienced differently in the W. Cape with its New Unity trends, and the region is distinctive for its "combativeness, its intellectual assertiveness, and its

critical disposition" (5). COSAS penetration into Coloured schools here were resisted by the strong New Unity Movement tradition of teachers and some students.

However, the Unity movement bequeathed to the W. Cape a tradition of debate which allowed COSAS to gain a foothold without conflict, in an otherwise ideologically hostile environment.

## 7.2. COSAS AND THE ANC

The Freedom Charter embodied COSAS's relationship with the ANC and, as Charles Carter points out, an overlap in its membership and activities:

"At the most general level, the linkage was largely symbolic, and was realised in the songs, slogans and political discourse of youth activists". (6)

While this ANC-identification was an important "site of identity articulation" for COSAS, it was also the most immediate way in which newcomers and outsiders perceived COSAS. While most could readily embrace this dimension, this gave other members and some parents anxieties in as much as it also attracted the unwanted attention of the state's security police. According to one COSAS member at the Third Congress:

"The Security Police said to me in front of my father that we tell students lies, that we are a student organisation, yet we sing liberation songs...Because of these issues, our aims must guide us: 'To create a spirit of

trust and co-operation between students, parents and teachers"...Each COSAS member must explain and discuss with their parents about their involvement and must involve them...Basically the state has no ground to intervene in COSAS because our organisation is legal...The state cannot tell you to leave COSAS and other organisations..." (7).

Coloured Cape Town student Peter Williams, recounts his experiences of this Congress:

"I learnt about them [African activists] as people who had the same longings as I...[but] to tell you the truth, I was scared because we sang political songs...It was the first time I had heard such militant songs. I was afraid because in history books they taught us that the Africans invited Piet Retief and they sang and danced before they murdered him (8)...That was the image I had, but I soon learnt to fit into the atmosphere".

While COSAS's political culture had the potential to alienate some elements in its constituency, it also provided an organisational space in which differences were submerged by a common goal.

COSAS's link with the ANC was not only symbolic but many members were involved in underground ANC structures. During my involvement with COSAS in the period 1980-83, I had links with underground ANC operatives in Soweto and arranged with them transport across the border for those COSAS members who were either going into exile or for military training.

One of the operatives, known as "Special", was discovered to be an agent of the state after he landed a group of ten members fleeing the country into a security police ambush near the Swazi border.

However, it was recognised that links with the ANC could have detrimental effects to the organisation and was potentially dangerous to its members. Security police regularly infiltrated COSAS, and those members who were detained were always questioned about ANC links. The disapproval of ties with the ANC was a protection mechanism against the tenuous legal status of COSAS in the context of state repression.

In the climate of rebellion of 1984-86, it became increasingly difficult to sustain arguments against links and direct involvement with the ANC. The ANC's post-Nkomati Accord decision to step up military activity within SA included circulation of ANC-SACP literature and an increase in armed action (9). Access to literature was a source of motivation for COSAS members and, on a wider level, Hyslop observes the formation of study groups of youth and students during this period. (10)

### 7.3. COSAS AND THE WORKERS

COSAS's links with parents, workers and community organisations was an ever-present issue within COSAS. This was influenced by previous worker-student solidarity action which had included strikes at Fattis and Monis and Wilson

Rowntree. COSAS always invited trade unions to address their national gatherings.

During 1979-82, COSAS had links with Charterist unions like SAAWU, GAWU and MACWUSA. These union's links with student and community movements distinguished them from FOSATU and CUSA-affiliated unions who remained apolitical (11).

SAAWU and GAWU often drew COSAS members to help with administration work and during strikes, COSAS would sometimes be allowed to address workers to express support (12). Most COSAS members saw the unions as the logical place in which to continue their activism (13) and Charterist unions provided employment for those who were not initially unionists (14).

On the whole COSAS/union links were occasional and priorities did not always coincide. At the 1983 Congress, the theme "Student-Worker Action" was reviewed and it was found that "very little work had been undertaken in regard to linking activities with the theme". (15)

#### 7.4. COSAS, AZASO AND NUSAS - THE NON-RACIAL ALLIANCE

In common with COSAS, and a basis for their alliance, AZASO's activities during 1980-82 revolved around national political issues as repressive conditions within AZASO's constituency - black tertiary institutions - also hindered open organisational activity.



The COSAS-AZASO relationship was initially unstructured and based mainly in Johannesburg amongst a small activist group. When state repression brought the exile and detention of COSAS's initial leadership, AZASO members contributed greatly to the rebuilding of organisation.

From 1982 both groups prioritised building organisation and of taking up educational issues. Thus, a more structured working relationship transpired and the two groups, with NUSAS, saw their role as the vanguard of the student movement with their common commitment to the Freedom Charter.

In practice, this alliance was mainly activist-centred and conducted by occasional joint meetings. Joint activities were largely short-term, issue-specific and limited to white liberal campuses. The Education Charter Campaign was envisaged to actualise the "triple alliance" in a long-term programme. Until it was suspended, however, the campaign has not moved beyond preliminaries.

Distance between designated areas of operation also created weaknesses in the alliance - black schools and campuses being extremely oppressive and isolated from white campuses which in contrast upheld freedom of organisation.

However, when viewed historically, the alliance did have positive aspects in its influencing of ideological debate. Visible work with left-wing whites strengthened arguments of advocates of the non-racial approach to South African struggle over those of black exclusivism.

The alliance, in terms of national struggle, became the first site in which non-racial co-operation was practiced in SA since the days of the Congress Alliance of the 1950s. When the UDF was formed, the alliance became a link into the white community.

The alliance obviously contributed to the organisational strength of COSAS and AZASO as they were able to access NUSAS's vast resources of which they were in need. Andrew Boraine, NUSAS president 1980/1 recalls:

"...the Freedom Charter Campaign of 1980...we ran in conjunction with COSAS. We had the resources and access to money and they would approach us and say 'we need 10 000 pamphlets for tomorrow', and we would print them and see that as our role..." (16) (quoted in Frederickse, p 172)

The SRCs of the liberal white campuses also availed their printing press for the use of COSAS in their national newsletter. NUSAS activists initiated service organisations like the Community Resources and Information Centre which helped with skills training. COSAS also found the analytical political critique of NUSAS publications to be useful in its own political training.

NUSAS and AZASO frequently gave inputs at COSAS gatherings and, furthermore, during state clampdowns, NUSAS comrades provided safe hide-outs for township activists. However, as Monde Mditshwa puts it, the alliance was a two-way street.

"If one traces back to the split of SASO from NUSAS (1960s) the white students were in a limbo politically, and also on what was going on in the townships. They were mainly relying on some second-hand or third-hand information. Now here was a relationship not just of people exchanging ideas and experiences, but who have common interests".

#### 7.5. SEARCHING FOR ALTERNATIVES - THE EDUCATION CHARTER CAMPAIGN

The idea for an Education Charter Campaign (henceforth to be called ECC) was adopted at COSAS's 1982 Council. In December of that year, a joint session of AZASO and COSAS decided on a joint initiative with NUSAS support. Originally the ECC was to be a document which was to "list student demands and rights" (17) and it was envisaged that it would be drawn up that year. (18) After much debate it was decided that the campaign would be long-term.

The ECC was partly a response to reform initiatives by the state and big business into education, which had begun in the 1976 aftermath and had become systematic. These reforms included the state lifting of the compulsory Afrikaans ruling, the renaming of the Dept of Bantu Education as the Dept of Education and Training, the introduction of compulsory education in some areas and teacher upgrading schemes. Big business invested in black education because of a concern with skills shortages in the economy. The HSRC-sponsored de Lange Commission of Enquiry

into education expressed a defacto reformist alliance between state and big business (19).

The de Lange Commission, published in 1981, proposed a single ministry of education which was intended to partially "de-racialise" education in order to restore political credibility (20). According to one analyst, the Commission aimed to modernise apartheid by improving social conditions in order to drive a wedge between urban and rural blacks (21).

However, the National Party, whilst experiencing a right-wing breakaway, was hindered from implementing a full reform programme. Instead it published the White Paper in 1983 in which de Lange's recommendations were rejected. However, some of the suggestions influenced reform in the early 1980s - equal spending on all races as an aim, expansion of technical orientation, privatisation.

Although de Lange proposed drastic changes, they were rejected by the alliance of NUSAS, AZASO and COSAS who critiqued the changes already made by the state as well as those in the de Lange Commission and the White Paper as cosmetic and "aimed at the continued survival of apartheid education". (22) The ECC was envisaged to meet the co-optive challenge in the state's initiatives.

The conception of the Education Charter as a "yardstick by which we measure all government reform" (23) was common. In the Declaration of the Education Charter Campaign", adopted by the alliance in 1984 states that "reforms will

not bring lasting solutions to our education problems" and pledges to "unite as workers, women, youth, students, professionals, sportspeople, and others to engage actively in a campaign for a Charter that will embody the short-term, medium-term and long-term demands for a non-racial, free and compulsory education for all in a united and democratic South Africa based on the will of the people."

From its inception, the Education Charter was modelled on the Freedom Charter: "The Freedom Charter is a valid and accepted document not only because it embodies democratic demands and objectives but because it was democratically formulated and adopted. So for an Education Charter to be accepted by all, it has to be democratically constituted". (24)

The ECC was seen as the "drive to get the views of thousands of ordinary South Africans (25) into the blueprint for alternative education".

"Rather than being the product of a handful of intellectuals, it should bring forward the demands of all student struggles, past and present". (26)

On the relationship between the Education and Freedom Charters the organisers' views were that "the ECC is trying to explore the educational demands set out in the Freedom Charter and to give them greater content. 'The doors of learning and culture shall be opened to all' - that is still our demand...we must ask which specific demands in the long and short term will help us to force these doors open". (27)

The ECC launch in 1984 was preceded by much debate in terms of the realistic scale of the task with regard to organisational limitation. Also, other issues had arisen that had needed more immediate action. After discussions it was decided that perhaps the ECC had initially been "premature" and "too optimistic" (28). The establishing and consolidation of COSAS branches was seen as a more immediate priority given the "young age" of the organisation.

Moreover, with unemployment and the rising cost of living, worker organisations would not be able to give their full support. The view of many activists was that student rejection of the education system was based on their own struggle experiences and thus if the ECC was pushed too quickly, it could become a substitute for this valuable experience.

Thus the ECC was to become a long-term project entailing five phases: consultation with other progressive organisations, formation of local and regional committees to popularise the ECC, a National Conference to elect a national ECC committee to collect demands and supervise the drawing up of a draft.

In spite of some good ECC launches, by mid 1985 activists reported lack of organisational skills, resources and finance. Work was also hindered by the 1984-6 student rebellions and the state of emergency and ultimately the banning of COSAS. However, following this, a National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) emerged with its

initiative of "People's Education" which tended to overshadow the ECC given the urgency of the crisis and the organisation of the NECC. Thus, AZASO suspended the ECC at its Congress in 1986.

Despite the outcome, the ECC was of historical significance in the context of the education struggle since the introduction of Bantu Education in 1953. Significantly, the students involved in concerns for alternatives to apartheid education have co-opted the notions of "democratic education" and "people's education" into their discourse.

In 1983, COSAS and AZASO adopted the slogans "United Action for Democratic Education" and "Students Organising for People's Education" respectively. Through the idea of the ECC, these organisations prefigured the NECC slogan of "People's Education for People's Power", although this has not been expressed in the literature.

The education clauses of the Freedom Charter, whilst entailing an alternative vision, were seen by students as a point of departure of the ECC, the idea for which arose out of the 1980s. According to Raymond Suttner and Jeremy Cronin, the demands of the Freedom Charter "reflect the time of when [it] was written (though this is less true of education as an issue)".

"To be more directly relevant to the field of education, the Education Charter could, if created through a sufficiently democratic process, establish what are the most

pressing and specific educational demands of the 1980s".  
(29)

The link between charters lay its sponsors open to charges of sectarianism by black-consciousness aligned groups. Their view is this:

"This linkage to the Freedom Charter and, more significantly, the failure of the organisers to invite relevant educational organisations to preliminary discussions could turn a potentially powerful mobilising instrument against the movement. That is, if those people who are critical of the Freedom Charter and who find the sectarian midwifery of the Education Charter repugnant do not transcend their initial distaste...it is vital for the success of such a campaign that all the oppressed and exploited people (or as many of them as possible) participate freely in this campaign. Only then will an education charter be a unifying document...a milestone on the road to liberation". (30)

These sentiments, were an important test for organisers of the ECC. They resurged in 1985-6 leading to a walk-out of groups affiliated to the National Forum (NF) at the SPCC conference in Dec 1985. (31) This posed a problem to the NECC which was difficult to solve ie the NECC's relationship to the UDF and NF and their student wings.

A partial solution came at the NECC's second conference in March 1986 when the NF held its conference at the same time. However, the NF made calls for mass action on dates



different from the NECC (32), but it was the latter who proved to have most influence on the unfolding events in the subsequent period.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Seekings (1990), op cit p 180
2. RRS, 1981 (SAIRR), p 28
3. SASPU National, vol 2(4), April 1981
4. see Patrick Lawrence, Vigilantes (Penguin, 1989)
5. Linda Chisholm "Education, Politics and Organisation: Educational Traditions and Legacies in Non-European Unity Movements, 1943-1986" in Transformation 15 (1991) p 1
6. Carter, op cit p 132
7. COSAS Congress Report
8. Reference is to the encounter between the Natal Afrikaner leader and Dingaan, the Zulu king who ordered Zulu armies to execute the "Boers". In Afrikaner history books, this incident serves to illustrate the racist ideology of segregation. The quote is from Frederickse (1990) op cit pp 190-191
9. see Howard Barneil, MK (Penguin, 1990)
10. Hyslop, op cit, p 195
11. Seekings (1990), op cit, pp 194-7; also see Doug Hindson "Union Unity" in South African Review no 2, (Ravan Press, 1984) p 92
12. Interview with Monde Mditshwa, op cit, the author has personal experience of this.
13. For example, the case of Kenny Finla, COSAS national organiser at the time of its banning, who went on to work for FAWU.
14. Seekings (1990), op cit, p 197
15. COSAS Congress Report, 1983.
16. SASPU National Vol3, no 1, Feb/Mar 1982
17. SAIRR Survey, 1982,p 40
18. Chisholm, op cit, p 18
19. Hyslop, op cit, p 140
20. Chisholm

21. "Declaration of the Education Charter Campaign" in SASPU Focus Vol 3, no 2, Nov 1984
22. Tiego Moseneke, AZASO president, in SASPU Focus Vol 3, No 1, February 1984
23. COSAS NEC interview, SASPU National op cit
24. Tiego Moseneke, op cit
25. SASPU National, Vol 4, No 3, Sept 1983
26. SASPU Focus, Vol 3, No 2, Nov 1984
27. SASPU National Vol 4, No 3, Sept 1983
28. R. Suttner and J. Cronin, Thirty Years of the Freedom Charter (Ravan Press, 1983, pp 183-5)
29. Hyslop, op cit, p 201
30. The Azanian Worker (1985)
31. Hyslop, op cit, p 201
32. Ibid

## CONCLUSION

This study has sought to focus attention on organisation as a distinct and salient site of analysis in the dynamics of political resistance in South Africa. I have argued that existing analyses of social movements which have been at the centre of popular struggles in South Africa in the 1980s have largely ignored the formal organisational aspects of these, particularly in the case of the education struggle.

Using COSAS as a case study, I have sought to show that the nature of students' educational struggles cannot simply be deduced from the objective structural factors which precipitate grievances and resistance. I have argued that the form and content of student (and youth) struggles are, in a very real sense, shaped by the organisational framework within which goals are set and strategies are developed. It is precisely this role that COSAS has played.

I have shown that in playing this role COSAS has had to transform itself in as much as it lent student struggles a sharper edge. In doing this, COSAS has had to walk a tight rope between addressing itself to general political issues on the one hand, and locating itself in the specifically educational site of struggle. I have argued that this dual character of COSAS is a reflection of the tendency of education based struggles to be politicised as the society-wide and political basis of educational conflict opens in the eyes of the students. I have shown this to be

the case with the 1976-77, 1980-81 and 1984-86 cycles of students' struggles.

COSAS's unique contribution to the 1984-86 phase of student struggles has been to bring to bear on them the strategic and conceptual advances bequeathed by past experiences of student struggles. It has availed to the students of 1984-86, ideological symbols and political direction. This has been possible because COSAS has spawned the three generations of students' educational struggles since 1976. In particular, its origins are traced to the 1976-77 generation of student struggles.

In this way, COSAS's experience disproves the conclusion which Colin Bundy makes about student/youth movements: that they are by their nature impermanent or discontinuous. Drawing from Hobsbawm, Bundy also argues that it is difficult for student/youth to sustain continuity of activity, organisation, or even programme and ideology (Bundy, 1984: 328).

While in South Africa, this may be valid in the widest sense of the events of 1984-86, within the narrower focus on organisation, COSAS has managed to endure both organisationally and ideologically. In the midst of the most consistent and concerted state assault on COSAS since its inception in 1979 - which brought it to near demise - the organisation has nevertheless survived. After its banning, the patchwork of localised student organisation which stepped into the vacuum left by COSAS, has self-consciously

modelled themselves on COSAS and have sought to perpetuate its tradition.

To be sure, the post-1985 context has changed in terms of the issues on the agendas of both student/youth and national political organisations. These now involve complex questions of constructing alternative structures of authority at the school, township and central government level.

Indeed, this is a measure of the achievement of black student/youth in South Africa, and within this, of COSAS, that this historical stage has been reached partly through their heroism. This celebration must, however, be tempered by the degenerationist tendencies which appeared in the course of the student/youth struggles of 1984-86. In as much as COSAS must be credited with lending efficacy to these struggles, so the organisational and the ideological weaknesses which appeared are a reflection on COSAS.

## APPENDIX

### COSAS NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

1979 - 1980: Ephraim Mogale, Modiose Metsing, Oupa Masuku, Mpho Masetha, Nomi Mogase, Vusi Gqoba, Vungashi (surname unknown), Wantu Zenzile, Jackie Jolobe (incomplete)

1981 - 1982: Wantu Zenzile, Vusi Gqoba, Oupa Masuku (incomplete - most others had left the country)

1982 - 1983: Shepherd Mati, Lulu Johnson, Lizo Nqokoto, Desmond Abrahams, Toivo Mokgojoe, Ivan Pharakge, Tshediso Matona

1983 - 1985: Lulu Johnson, Allen Paulse, Harold Lesoro, White Mohapi, Jabu Khumalo, Mpho Lekgoro, Shepherd Mati, Thabane Magashoa, Kenny Fihla, Lolo Mkhonto

### IMPORTANT DATES

1979: COSAS FORMED

1980: COSAS ADOPTED THE FREEDOM CHARTER AND CALLS FOR THE RELEASE OF NELSON MANDELA AND OTHERS

1981: COSAS HOSTS NATIONAL CONSULTATIVE MEETINGS TO DISCUSS THE 1980 BOYCOTTS. DECISION TAKEN TO RETURN TO SCHOOL AND THE MOTTO "EACH ONE TEACH ONE" ADOPTED

1982: SECOND ANNUAL CONGRESS HELD IN CAPE TOWN. DECISION TAKEN TO EXCLUDE NON-SCHOLARS AND TO FORM NATIONAL YOUTH GROUP. THEME "STUDENT-WORKER ALLIANCE" ADOPTED. DECEMBER, NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING HELD IN DURBAN. EDUCATION CHARTER CAMPAIGN FORMALLY ENDORSED.

1983: FIFTH NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING IN JUNE. IN DECEMBER, THIRD NATIONAL CONGRESS IN DURBAN. DECISION TAKEN TO LAUNCH THE SRC CAMPAIGN AND SUPPORT SCHOOL BOYCOTTS.

1985: COSAS BANNED - AUGUST 28

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Jabu Ngwenya, December 1991 (Cape Town), January 1992 (Johannesburg)  
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