Chapter 2
The Soweto Uprising of June 1976
by Phil Bonner

By 10:30 on 16 June 1976, thousands of students had gathered in Orlando West to begin a protest march against the imposition of the Afrikaans language as the medium of instruction in Soweto's schools. More were on their way. The local police were totally unprepared for a march of this size. Eventually they opened fire, killing Hastings Ndlovu and Hector Peterson. The shootings sparked off days of riots and hundreds of deaths. The Soweto revolt had begun.

The police on duty had no special training in crowd control and did not even possess a loudhailer. They first tried to use dogs and teargas, but students killed two dogs and most of the teargas canisters proved to be defective. Police claimed that students had thrown stones, and that they, the police, had fired warning shots in the air.

After Sergeant Hattingh fired the first fatal shot, chaos ensued. Student leaders were unable to disperse their followers. Students responded to the shootings with fury. Streets were barricaded, cars burned and two white officials killed. By lunchtime students were looting and burning government buildings and liquor stores across much of Soweto.

That afternoon the paramilitary riot police arrived. Their instructions were clear - shoot to kill; law and order should be maintained "at any cost". The police shot dead another 11 people before evening.

News of the events in Soweto sparked off protests in black townships across the country. Another 93 people were shot dead by police over the next two days. By the end of February 1977 the official death toll stood at 575 - 75 coloured, 2 white, 2 Indian and 496 African. Many areas were affected — 22 townships in the Transvaal, 16 areas of Cape Town, 4 townships in Port Elizabeth and 9 other towns. Over the next decade and a half, students would join hands with trade unions, civic organisations and the external armed wings of the ANC and PAC to topple the apartheid regime.

Are there different analyses of the uprising?

The Soweto rebellion was initiated by school children in protest against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools. However, a combustible situation had been developing in Soweto since the mid-1960s as a result of an accumulation of various grievances. The Afrikaners-medium issue provided the spark for the explosion.

To understand the rebellion we need to trace the big social and economic changes that had been taking place in Johannesburg and Soweto over the previous ten years — what I call structural changes. We have to understand the way these changes affected the cultures and consciousness of various parts of Soweto's population, the way a set of more limited educational grievances gave rise to the 16 June demonstration, and the way police reactions sparked widespread insurrections.

Different authors place different emphasis on various factors. Some
Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd and his government began to see urban Africans as a far bigger threat to white supremacy than had previously been imagined. Up until 1960 whites had accepted the idea of an African urban population with the right to live and work permanently in the towns. The government even gave migrant workers the opportunity to secure rights to permanent residence if they had worked continuously for the same employer for 10 years or in the same industrial area for 15 years.

After 1960 the government began to restrict and even remove rights enjoyed by urban Africans. In addition, fewer and fewer new houses, schools and police stations were built in African townships. Africans were told that they could enjoy political and civic rights only in African homelands like the Transkei and Bophutatswana. State revenue and resources were redirected from urban African areas to the homelands.

The policy shift in 1960 from a practical apartheid to a more dogmatic grand apartheid was, therefore, a turning point in its own right. It partly helps to explain the next turning point — the main turning point that we are discussing — the 1976 Soweto students uprising.

New repressive laws

Another change also occurred in the early 1960s. A series of repressive laws were enacted which began to turn South Africa into a police state. In June 1962 the General Laws Amendment Act No 76 (which came to be known as the Sabotage Act) was passed. It created the offence of sabotage; the penalties were the same as for treason, including the death penalty. (This was in response to the ANC and PAC’s move to armed struggle.) Almost a year later, in May 1963, the General Laws Amendment Act No 37 was passed. This law — which came to be known as the “90 Day Law” — permitted the detention for 90 days without a warrant of any person suspected of a political crime, without access to a lawyer.

Many detained under this Act were re-arrested at the end of the first 90 days. One thousand people were detained under this law over the next two years, and held in solitary confinement. From this point on, torture of detainees became routine. Up until then, a person could refuse to make a statement to the police. Now most prisoners broke under the brutal torture. Many were sentenced to life imprisonment. Many hangings took place in the course of the 1960s — 101 persons were hanged in that decade, far more than were executed in the next 20 years.

By these means, popular resistance was broken in the early 1960s.

Economic changes

Repression was not the only reason for the quietness and submissiveness of Soweto’s residents during the 1960s. The 1960s were a boom time in

autonomy — freedom of action; independence

What were some of the structural reasons for the uprising?

Policy shift to grand apartheid

Between 1954 and 1960 over 50 000 houses were built for Africans in Soweto. The rate of house building slowed down in the early 1960s and stopped completely in 1965. This did not mean that the demand for houses had been satisfied. The children of Soweto’s residents grew up, married and started families in the 1960s, so that by the mid-1970s an acute shortage of housing had developed.

Government policy on housing changed for political reasons. After the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the ANC and PAC in March 1960,
South Africa, and particularly in Johannesburg. At the peak of this boom in 1963-1964, the economy grew by 8.5%. Between 1965 and 1969 foreign investment increased by over 60%, much of this in the manufacturing industry. Machine-based factories required semi-skilled labour rather than the unskilled labour of the past. Semi-skilled labour was generally better paid. Because of this and other factors, a small part of the prosperity of the "golden age" of the 1960s trickled down to black Sowetans.

From the early to mid 1960s black wages began to improve. The numbers of those employed in semi-skilled work doubled between 1960 and 1970. The average number of wage earners per family rose from 1.3 to 2.2 between 1956 and 1968, as wives found it easier to get jobs and children grew up and began to contribute to the family income. The wage gap between black and white workers narrowed across all sectors between 1964 and 1974, reflecting the improved wages of African workers on the Witwatersrand.

How did grand apartheid contribute to the uprising?

Rising incomes produced a more consumerist black urban culture in the 1960s, which also played a role in quieting political discontent. The government’s very success in diverting black opposition, however, created an attitude among its members which made sure that black opposition revived. Black silence encouraged the government and its officials to believe that the majority of Africans accepted apartheid and that only a handful of agitators — whom they had now silenced in various ways — were opposed. This persuaded them to introduce a string of new policies and laws that had an increasingly harsh ideological, arrogant and unreasonable character.

Some of these were implemented during the prime ministership of Hendrik Verwoerd, who was assassinated in September 1966. Others were introduced under his successor, B.J. Vorster, the former Minister of Police. In 1964 the Bantu Laws Amendment Act further tightened influx control.

Previously, Section 29 of this Act had allowed the authorities to deport anyone declared "idle" out of the urban areas and into the homelands. However, the authorities had not been able to enforce this clause because they had not clearly defined what "idle" meant. Now it was defined as refusing employment three times and losing one’s job more than twice in six months.

Women were especially hard hit by the Act, being prohibited from entering the urban areas except on a visitor’s permit. Over the next three years the government ordered that widows, unmarried mothers, divorced women and deserted women were not entitled to housing, and that women born in a homeland who married an urban man were not entitled to permanent rights in the towns.

Pass raids netted tens of thousands of unfortunate urban residents disqualified in these ways, and convictions for pass offences nationally doubled from 384 497 in 1962 to 693 661 in 1967.

Further attacks on African urban rights were mounted in 1968. First the government decreed that the right to hold home leases would end. Almost 10 000 houses in Soweto had been built or sold to residents under the 30-year leasehold scheme. Without the slightest consultation, these were abolished. In the same year, migrant workers were forced to return home at the end of their 12-month contract and to renew it in their homeland. Because each contract lasted for only one year, this made it impossible for migrant workers to qualify for permanent status. Finally, the government passed a law which laid down a ratio of black to white workers (3:1). The aim was to force industries which employed large numbers of Africans, such as textile factories, into the so-called “border areas” close to the homelands. These measures intended to reverse the flow of Africans into the cities.

Two of the main ways the government used to discourage Africans from living in the towns was by restricting the scope for African professionals and entrepreneurs and placing a ban on the building and operation of African
Minister of Bantu Affairs M.C. Nel unapologetically announced, "One of the chief aims of my department is to bring to fruition the state policy of reversing the stream of Bantu to the white areas and to bring about an exodus of these Bantu to the homelands... I ask all of you to widen your horizons to become nation builders rather than township builders."

The absurd actions to which grand apartheid policies could lead were fully exposed when the Bantu Affairs Department pressed the Johannesburg City Council to support a scheme in which 23,000 Zulu-speaking families in Soweto would be relocated to the proposed township of Waay Hoek on the outskirts of Ladysmith in Natal. The idea was that the male workers of these families would be accommodated in Soweto's hostels during the week and then would commute 400 kilometres each weekend by Japanese high-speed electric train. It should be no surprise that black Sowetans began to see themselves as being increasingly under siege from an unsympathetic and even hostile government. This, too, contributed to the anger and frustration that fed the 1976 rebellion.

secondary schools. This tended to force black traders and students into their supposed homelands. In 1969 the already-limited rights of African traders in townships were restricted even further. Traders in the townships were prohibited from building or owning their own premises, and were not allowed to open up more than one shop or to do business “for any purpose other than that of providing for the essential domestic requirements of Bantu residents”. Shops had to be a certain size, could only trade within restricted hours and were only permitted to sell a very narrow range of goods. If an entrepreneur had any ambition, he or she was forced to pursue it in a homeland.

A similar policy applied to secondary education. Between 1962 and 1971 no new secondary schools were built in Soweto, and all resources for such purposes were channelled to the homelands. The number of African children enrolling at primary schools expanded much more rapidly than the resources allocated to this sector. Some classes contained over 100 students, and teachers were often forced to teach two shifts each day. Educational standards dropped, breeding growing dissatisfaction among pupils and contributing to the militant spirit that exploded in June 1976.

Prime Minister Vorster dealt with conflicting opinions in his Cabinet far differently from his predecessor, Hendrik Verwoerd. Whereas Verwoerd had imposed his own inflexible view and would tolerate no dissent from his Cabinet, Vorster allowed his ministers greater freedom, to a point where they could be pursuing contradictory and even conflicting policies. In the end, this would prove fatal to his government.

In 1970 hardline ministers of the Vorster government took another decisive step in the direction of stripping urban Africans of their civic rights in the towns. In that year, the Bantu Homelands Citizen Act was passed. It compelled all urban Africans to become citizens of whatever ethnic homeland they were supposed to have originated from, whether or not they had ever set foot there. The practical implementation of this policy was postponed until the mid-1970s when Transkei and Bophuthatswana became fully independent. With this, the thinking of the dominant section of Vorster's cabinet became plain.

In yet another effort to tighten its grip on the townships, in 1972-1973 the government removed responsibility for the administration of black urban townships from adjacent white municipalities and placed them under what were termed Bantu Administration Boards, which fell directly under the authority of the Bantu Affairs Department. The West Rand Administration Board (WRAB), which managed Soweto, was headed by the hardliner, Mannie Mulder. Financial subsidies previously provided by city councils were withdrawn. Services in an increasingly overcrowded Soweto deteriorated alarmingly. The mounting volume of complaints from Soweto's residents were brushed aside by unsympathetic, inexperienced and often racist WRAB officials.

**What was the link between structural changes and political action?**

Ideology and dogma cannot indefinitely ignore material pressures and economic realities. After a brief drop, the economic boom of the 1960s extended into the 1970s. As industry expanded, there were not enough whites to meet the growing demand for skilled jobs. At the same time the low and deteriorating standards of black education meant that the skills shortage could not be met from that source. Employers and employer-sympathetic newspapers such as the *Sunday Times* and the *Rand Daily Mail* began to agitate for better education and training for the black urban workforce.

Even though much of government policy was moving in the opposite direction, a more liberal section of the Cabinet began to support this demand. In 1972 the government reluctantly accepted that new secondary schools would have to be provided in the urban areas. This was done, and the number of secondary school pupils rose quickly.

The sudden growth in the number of secondary and primary school pupils in Soweto meant that a major change had taken place in the structure
ross the number of conary school leavers from 224,893 in 1975. The conary schools in v especially fast. secondary schools between 1972 and ondary school increased from 1972 to nearly 20 in 1976.

As the leading spokesperson of black consciousness, Steve Biko, put it, its aim was:

“to instil the idea of self-determination, to restore feelings of pride and dignity to blacks after centuries of racist oppression. It is an attitude of mind, a way of life. It is a realisation that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the minds of the oppressed.”

completing Standard 5 were able to proceed directly to secondary school. In that year, therefore, Standard 6 and Standard 5 graduated into secondary schooling together. Overcrowding reached new heights. Educational standards declined further. The injustices of Bantu education were becoming increasingly intolerable.

How did black consciousness contribute to the uprising?

Within this anxious and angry environment, a new political grouping and ideology made its appearance. It was generally described as black consciousness. Its main vehicles were the South African Students Organisation (SASO), launched at the University of the North in 1969, the Black People’s Convention (BPC) formed in 1972, and the South African Students Movement (SASM), which emerged out of the African students movement in the same year. Black consciousness made a massive contribution to changing the attitudes of black South Africans.

Black consciousness marked a radical break with the resignation, the fear and the apathy of the 1960s. One of its main contributions was the injection a new kind of courage and self-assertion among its members — a kind of courage which would help them to brave assault and torture, and which would lead them to refuse to be intimidated, whatever the threat.

Opinions differ as to what kind of impact black consciousness and its school pupil organisation SASM had on the climate of opinion among Soweto’s school-goers, and how much it contributed to the 1976 students uprising. By 1973 SASM had branches in nine schools in Soweto. Resources were scarce, however. The organisation was set back in March of that year by the banning of the top leadership of the South African Students Congress (SASO) as well as Mathe Diseko, the national secretary of SASM. SASM revived in 1974, encouraged by the military coup in Portugal in April 1974 and the decolonisation of Mozambique. As SASM leaders began to gain confidence, they organised public meetings at which militant speeches were given.

It is difficult to know how many students were drawn into SASM. It does
As Tebogo Mohapi recalls:

"SASM had reached a point where we couldn’t hide from students and we gradually became more and more conspicuous in the schools... Towards the end of my Standard 8 year we’d clearly gathered a large number of students at my school. Some of us started rotating from school to school to talk to the students. Corporal punishment was one of the basic projects of SASM... we’d also talk about Bantu Education as a poison that enslaved us... This was how we organised SASM into a fully-fledged organisation."

seem clear, though, that it did have some impact on the general political atmosphere in some schools.

What were the final events leading to the uprising?

It was against this background that Minister of Bantu Affairs and Development, M.C. Botha, announced the compulsory use of Afrikaans (instead of English) as the medium of instruction in half the school subjects from Standard 5 onwards. This was another example of a hardline authoritarian minister enforcing a policy which was inconsistent with the slightly more reformist path that other ministers in the Cabinet were taking. African teachers, headmasters and parents expressed outrage. Pass rates were already desperately low; this would force them down even further.

At more or less the same time, the Transkei was due for independence, and it became clear that under the new legislation as many as 1.3 million urban Xhosa, whether born in the Transkei or not, would lose their South African citizenship and thus be liable for deportation.

The frustration and anger of Soweto’s residents now became intense. It was directed squarely at “stooge” homeland leaders like Kaiser Matanzima of the soon-to-be-independent Transkei.

Sifiso Ndlovu, in his book, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter Memories of June 1976*, questions the role of SASM or any other organisation outside of Soweto in the evolution of the youth rebellion that followed. He stresses that the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction only affected Forms 1 and 2 (Grades 8 and 9), while SASM concentrated on senior students. According to Ndlovu, the student leaders that later emerged — such as Tsietsie Mashinini and Murphy Morobe, both belonging to SASM — were students in the higher grades “and were not involved in our struggle”. That struggle began with a boycott of classes in protest against Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, which began in junior secondary and higher primary schools. As examinations approached in mid-year, students and parents became increasingly desperate about the situation. It seems that at this point SASM saw the opportunity to take a leadership role.

Several members of its national executive called a meeting at Soweto’s YMCA, which was intended to form a SASM regional branch. A large number of students attended. Tsietsie Mashinini, a final-year student at Morris Isaacson High School in Jabavu, Soweto, won approval for a mass demonstration on 16 June. Tebogo Mohapi recalls that students thought they would have a peaceful demonstration — a surprise for their teachers and the authorities, but peaceful.

Surprise it was, but peaceful it was not. Police violence against the student protesters, as we know now, provided the spark which ignited all the frustrations and grievances that had been building up over the previous ten years. After 16 and 17 June 1976, nothing in South Africa would be the same again. An old era was past. A new one was beginning.

References
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Chapter 3
Politics and Consciousness in Cape Town Communities, 1980-1985
by Sean Field

Anti-apartheid political organisation under the apartheid system was dangerous work. This organisation happened in the context of people living in their racial or cultural ghettos, with their own experiences, histories and issues to be confronted. This chapter describes some of the successes and difficulties faced by political activists working in the coloured communities of Cape Town. While many communities in the Western Cape were highly politicised during the 1980s, a central issue faced by activists was expressed as follows:

I think that has been a hell of a sore point in the coloured community, where people explain their lack of participation, or their apathy, by saying, 'We don't actually have a history of feeling confident that people stand together in the coloured areas'.

This chapter explores these issues through the words of United Democratic Front (UDF) activists. It describes the context of political struggles — beginning with the school boycotts of the early 1980s, consumer boycotts and stayaways which reached a climax in 1985. In addition, this chapter argues that it was inappropriate to label the political consciousness of coloured communities in the 1980s as “apathy” or “false consciousness”. The reasons for people's conservatism or unresponsiveness to political campaigns were far more complex.

What contributed to the building of people's organisations in Cape Town from 1980 to 1984?

The 1976 Soweto student uprising was a significant act of political defiance against the apartheid state. In the Western Cape, the Soweto uprising triggered student revolts in two Cape Town communities, Bonteheuwel and Langa. These student activists were mainly black consciousness (BC) in ideological orientation. The organisations they forged — such as the Black People's Convention (BPC) — were short-lived and crushed by state repression by 1977. In contrast, the 1980 school boycotts in the Western Cape were a more important turning point in the building of sustainable anti-apartheid organisations in schools and communities. They also marked the beginning of the re-emergence of organisations aligned with the African National Congress (ANC), also known as “the Charterist Movement”, inside South Africa.
Due to the 1980 school boycotts, the need to build not only student organisations in schools, but also community structures in order to politically mobilise people more broadly became evident to activists. In April 1980 the Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (CAHAC) was launched. This stimulated the growth of civic and residents’ organisations in coloured and African areas across the Western Cape.

It also spurred the development of youth structures outside of schools and universities. The Cape Youth Congress (CAYCO) was launched in July 1983. Together with the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), which organised in schools, CAYCO was possibly the most militant organisation in the region. Later, in 1985, these organisations were at the forefront of battles with the police and army.

The 1980-1984 period was an intense time for the recruitment, training and building of community organisations. It also triggered heated debates among the various political tendencies of the Western Cape. The New Unity Movement, the Western Cape Action League, black consciousness groups and the Charterist Movement debated questions such as who should be included in people’s organisations, the nature of working-class leadership and, most crucially, the strategy and tactics of political mobilisation.

By August 1983, with the national launch of the United Democratic Front in Mitchells Plein, the Charterist organisations were becoming stronger in terms of numbers and organisational capacity. The UDF was a broad front of organisations that included youth, student, women’s, civic and other political organisations under its banner. Under the watchful eyes of the apartheid government, the UDF denied that it was a front for the ANC in exile. In reality, however, that is what it amounted to. The UDF put forward a non-racial strategy of developing alliances across the apartheid-defined communities of African, coloured, Asian and white people.

The first major campaign of the UDF was against the Tricameral Parliament elections of 1984. This was particularly significant in the Western Cape, given the number of potential coloured voters that resided in the region. On the whole, the boycott strategy of the UDF succeeded in ensuring that only small numbers of people actually voted.

It is probable that the vast majority of people classified as coloured were opposed to the Tricameral Parliament, but did this necessarily mean that they supported the anti-apartheid liberation movement? Beneath the public rhetoric of leadership figures, on-the-ground activists debated and thought through these complex issues.

In established working-class areas, people were very aware of the problems they faced, especially socio-economic problems — wages, working conditions, employment, housing, electricity, water, the condition of streets and much more. Finding ways of drawing links in people’s minds between their socio-economic problems and the broader political context was not only a source of debate in community organisations, but also for the emerging anti-apartheid or independent trade union movement.

From 1979 black African workers could again legally organise themselves into trade unions, but these worker rights were still severely limited under apartheid labour laws. For example, it was very difficult to have a legal strike and it was illegal to engage in stayaways. With the success of the November 1994 stayaways in the Transvaal, worker stayaways became a common strategy to challenge both the apartheid state and private companies, by building alliances between trade union and community organisations across the country. However, this strategy was less successful in the Western Cape, for reasons that will be discussed later.

In the 1979-1984 period, several consumer boycotts were organised to help striking workers. This community strategy helped to support trade unions and simultaneously put pressure on specific private companies. For example, there was the Fattis and Moris boycott organised by the Food and Canning Workers Union (FCWU), the Rowntree boycott organised by the Charterist — refers to the Freedom Charter, adopted in 1955. At the time, it was the guiding political document for the ANC and allied organisations.

Island — used like this the word refers to Robben Island, where many political prisoners were sent to serve out their sentences.
South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), the red meat boycott organised by the General Workers Union (GWU) and the Grand Bazaars boycott organised by the Retail and Allied Workers Union (RAWU).

By late 1984 community organisations, especially those under the banner of the UDF, were challenging the apartheid state through various campaigns, widespread publicity and effective mobilisation. But this was all a build-up to the intensive clashes of the following year.

How was the apartheid state made ungovernable in 1985?

1985 was an important year in the political history of South Africa. Across the country anti-apartheid organisations confronted the police, army and government officials. It was the year that people’s organisations deliberately aimed to make the apartheid state ungovernable. Protest marches, boycotts, stayaways and strikes disrupted state structures in thousands of communities and schools. For weeks, or even months in some communities, the state was no longer in control of local governance. However, by the end of the year the apartheid state had begun to regain control through detentions, beatings, shootings, assassinations and the implementation of unlimited powers granted to the state under repeated States of Emergency.

Cape Town was one of the many cities which witnessed on-going clashes, especially street battles between students and youth on the one hand and the police and army on the other. While the police and army used Casspirs, tear gas and guns filled with buckshot, birdshot, rubber bullets or live ammunition, protesters used stones and in some cases home-made petrol bombs.

Four of the most persistent flashpoints in Cape Town were Athlone in the vicinity of Belgravia and Thornton Roads, Bonteheuwel in the Vanguard Drive area, Guguletu in the vicinity of NY1, and Mitchells Plain in the Spine Road area. The University of the Western Cape (UWC) was the most militant site of university struggles. Many student-police clashes took place on the campus and on Modderdam Road. There were also many other sites of struggle.

People of all ages and across the cultural spectrum participated in these struggles. However, students and youth from the coloured and African areas of Cape Town constituted the vast majority. Those “young lions and lionesses” (as they were described at the time) took the biggest risks and often suffered the worst consequences. Images and stories of these hand-to-hand street battles were communicated through the global mass media. This directly stimulated the emergence of a disinvestment and sanctions campaign in various countries.

The countrywide State of Emergency resulted in the systematic detention or banning of the student, youth and community leadership. By 1986 anti-apartheid organisations were on the defensive. In the period 1987-1989, as organisations found ways to regroup, discussions were taking place about the nature of organisation in this repressive period.

The relationship between the militant young activists who emerged out of the 1980 school boycotts and the older generation was a significant dynamic. This dynamic directly influenced the difficulties of conscientising, organising and mobilising people for the anti-apartheid cause in the coloured communities of Cape Town.

What was the nature of political consciousness in the coloured communities of the Western Cape?

Colonial, pre-apartheid and apartheid governments lumped a wide range of cultural groups under the broad label, coloured. This historical reality had direct consequences for anti-apartheid political organisation in the areas defined as “coloured” under the Group Areas Act of 1950. The years of life
We had a naive idea that the mass public space that emerged in the post-1980 period could sort of last ad infinitum, and that was the big mistake we made. Not that we didn't expect repression, but we always thought repression would be, in a sense, short-term. We never realised that we could go into a period where there would be a permanent State of Emergency. The second thing about the period, we had to understand that we had to work at very different levels in building the MDM [Mass Democratic Movement]. We did not build the underground properly.

"The other problem with that period, it was a period of mainly very young people, youth who had emerged and were fired-up politically. Obviously there was a need of all those organisational structures but I don't think that were able to capture older people in a way that more senior people would have been able to do. I think it was to some extent a limitation."

"Very different levels" the activist means both "above ground" and "underground" organisational work. "Underground" did not mean the illegal or semi-legal organisations or political organisations, rather it refers to the network of "cell structures", which would include ANC-political-military operatives working together with UDF activists.

From interviews conducted by the author.

Cape Town, especially in working-class areas, voted for the National Party in the first democratic elections in 1994. By the late 1980s many activists realised that "apathy" was not the best way to describe a complex generational situation. The youth in most coloured communities had been politicised by the events of 1980-1985. However, their parents and grandparents had generally been uninvolved in these events; they tended to remember the pre-apartheid and apartheid experiences of their formative years.

Equally, given that some sections of the coloured community did not conform to the theories espoused by the liberation movements, does not mean that the community was the "problem". Some activists felt that the problem was with themselves. One of the principles of Charterist approaches to political organisation is to always start organisational work "at where your community is at" and not where you would like people to go or be. The activist quoted in the box is implying that, all too often, activists in coloured areas forgot this basic principle.

By the late 1980s anti-apartheid organisations across the country were either in retreat or gradually rebuilding after the heavy repression of the repeated States of Emergency from 1985 to 1989. While a sense of pessimism dominated then, the re-emergence of the UDF in the guise of the Mass Democratic Movement gave new hope that the internal liberation movement could regroup. As February 1990 approached, the general expectation was that the liberation movements still had a long struggle ahead. There were many reasons for F.W. de Klerk's watershed speech on 2 February 1990, but one factor must be acknowledged — the battles fought during the 1980s by thousands of South Africans had inflicted more harm on the apartheid state than was fully realised at the time.

**Conclusion**

The oral history quotations of political activists that I have selected and interpreted suggest that the vast majority of people in urban communities in Cape Town were not apathetic. Many, especially the youth, were very politicised and believed in different strands of Marxist theory. However, the politics of many other people, especially the older generation, were more cautious and conservative. This does not mean that they had no political ideology. On the contrary, they did have political views, usually anti-apartheid views, but these views often did not match the approaches taken by liberation organisations. It must also be remembered that the 1980s allowed very little space to debate these issues openly. In post-1994 South Africa we have the democratic freedom to do this, but we must engage in these debates in a non-judgemental way. As both the 1994 and 1999 general
"I think we must start looking at traditions: I think it's a standard starting point to talk about the traditions of the coloured community and the separation of their experience of economic life from their experience of political life... The coloured community was profoundly dislocated with the removals of District Six and other urban and rural area removals since the 1950s, and what we tend to forget is that it's a gradual process that has dislocated the political consciousness of people. So in terms of their history and traditions, that's why the coloured community doesn't have any immediate feel for political participation nor an immediate political responsiveness to issues."

"One will have to employ different organisational styles, because in the coloured areas, activists tend to do things as people do things in the African areas. Because of this mistake we have many times messed up situations in coloured townships. Once you come to terms with the conservatism in the coloured areas it will be so much easier to organise, but you constantly organise in terms of a perceived militancy that you want to create."

From interviews conducted by the author.

elections indicate, a similar diversity of political opinions still exists within coloured communities. Many activists and writers, including myself, do not agree with the conservative ideologies some people believe, but it is a reality we must continue to analyse with empathy and locate within the specific historical context of Cape Town.

References
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empathy — the ability to imagine why people think and believe as they do; putting oneself "in the other person's shoes". Empathy does not mean we have to sympathise or agree with the other person, but that we should try to understand them.
Chapter 4
The Township Uprising, September-November 1984

by Noor Nieftagodiën

Apartheid was brought to an end by the struggles of millions of ordinary people in townships, factories and rural areas. The insurrection of the 1980s was fundamentally different from previous struggles against white minority rule, both in its scope and militancy. It represented the most serious challenge to apartheid that had been seen up to that time. The most intense and sustained struggle between the mass democratic movement and the apartheid state occurred between 1984 and 1986. Workers, students, youth, women, the unemployed and villagers in remote rural areas rose up in unprecedented numbers to end their oppression. It was this mass uprising that eventually made the apartheid system unworkable and forced the authorities to seek a negotiated settlement with the liberation movements.

The turning point in the 1980s insurrection occurred from September to November 1984. At that time the African townships of the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal (PWV, today known as Gauteng) erupted in mass demonstrations and stayaways against the rapidly deteriorating conditions in the townships and the deepening education crisis. The opening act of the revolutionary drama occurred on September 3 in the Vaal townships of Sebokeng, Sharpeville, Evaton, Boipatong and Bophelong. A one-day stayaway was organised to demonstrate against proposed rent increases. Two weeks later a less successful stayaway was called in Soweto to support the Vaal residents. On October 22 a successful stayaway was organised in the East Rand township of Kwa Thema. The climax of this mounting revolt was reached on November 5 and 6, when more than a million workers and students embarked on the largest stayaway since the early 1960s. This remarkable action had a huge impact on South African politics. It shook the apartheid government and employers to the foundation, and injected huge confidence into the oppressed population.

An important feature in these struggles was the growing unity in action between township organisations — students and civics — and trade unions. The unity that was forged between workers and youth took many years to develop, but once it was achieved it was a formidable force for change. Workers and students were at the heart of this alliance. Their respective organisations — the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) — organised and led these successful struggles. It is to their origins and role that we now turn.

What role was played by the emerging independent unions?

The severe repression that followed the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1960 had a devastating effect on the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), the most important black union movement to emerge in the 1950s. During the 1960s few black workers were organised in unions, and industrial action virtually ground to a halt. Between 1962 and 1972 the average number of black workers per year involved in any form of industrial action barely exceeded 4,000. At the same time, many black workers moved into
The success of semi-skilled and even skilled jobs in industry, making them even more indispensable to the economy. Despite their improved occupational status, black workers continued to receive relatively low wages and were subjected to oppressive conditions on the shop floor. The extreme exploitation of black workers persisted at a time when the South African economy experienced phenomenal expansion, exceeding the growth rates of many industrialised countries. The main beneficiary of the “golden period” of apartheid was the minority white population. This was clearly an untenable situation.

The industrial calm of the 1960s was shattered in January 1973 when more than 60 000 black workers in Durban went on strike to demand higher wages. In the following years, numerous new workers’ organisations sprang up, especially in the main industrial centres of Johannesburg, the East Rand, Cape Town and Durban. Importantly, former SACTU activists combined with left-wing students and academics to establish new industrial unions.

Although important strides were made between 1973 and 1976, the process of building new trade unions for black workers was often very difficult, as workers had to confront conservative employers and a repressive government. Workers had to organise secretly for fear of being victimised or dismissed. Union meetings occurred mostly outside the plants, often in hostels where it was easier to operate without detection. Strikes were ruthlessly dealt with. For example, the strikes at Heinemann Electrical and Armourplate Glass in 1976 were crushed by a combination of police brutality and employer intransigence. After the 1976 Soweto uprising, the new unions faced a further setback when the government imposed banning orders on 22 union activists.

Despite the various obstacles placed in their path, black workers and their supporters succeeded in building a number of new unions, including the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), the General Workers Union (GWU), the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) and the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW). These unions were to become the foundation on which the new union movement would be constructed. Despite the worsening economic conditions in the 1970s, workers continued to press for recognition and for better wages and working conditions, although with mixed success.

An important milestone in the history of unions was reached in 1979 when a number of unions joined forces to launch the Federation of South African Trade Unions. In 1980 another federation, the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), was launched. While FOSATU adopted a largely independent political position, CUSA openly associated itself with black consciousness. FOSATU affiliates were at the centre of a wave of industrial action over the following years which challenged management on a range of issues including unfair dismissals, health conditions and retrenchment procedures. Workers were becoming more confident and were prepared to assert their power in order to secure basic rights for themselves at plant level.

The economic downturn of the early 1980s caused the number of strikes to increase significantly as workers tried hard to defend their jobs. In 1981 more than 300 strikes were recorded, a significant feat at the time considering the prevailing tough economic conditions and the employers’ offensive against organised workers. The East Rand was at the centre of this strike wave — more than 50 strikes involving nearly 25 000 workers took place in the region in only five months. FOSATU affiliates were in the forefront of these shop floor struggles. In 1982 FOSATU organised 145 strikes, involving about 90 000 workers, compared to 13 strikes organised by CUSA which involved only 10 000 workers.

FOSATU placed great emphasis on building strong and democratic workplace organisations, based on the principle of workers’ democracy. Shop stewards were the pivotal activists in this new form of union. They were directly elected by and therefore accountable to workers. FOSATU also focused much of its attention on defending the position of workers at the point of production. Some FOSATU activists feared that becoming involved in community politics would endanger workplace organisation. Others were suspicious of interference by any outside political organisation, including the liberation movements or community political organisations.

To some extent, this view was influenced by a socialist current within the unions which viewed the existing liberation organisations as nationalistic and not especially interested in developing a working-class programme and leadership in the struggle against apartheid. Thus in April 1982 the Secretary General of FOSATU, Joe Foster, delivered a speech in which he set out the federation’s objective of creating an independent political organisation for workers.

FOSATU certainly did not abstain from links with community organisations. However, at first it did not actively encourage its affiliates to become involved in community or political struggles.

Eventually the mounting struggles in the townships, especially their occupation by security forces, pushed the unions in the direction of greater involvement in township politics. The establishment of community-based shop steward councils on the East Rand was a further indication of the growing links between factories and communities. Students also regularly
asked unions for co-operation. They became the critical point of connection between workers and the community, particularly in 1984.

How did students contribute to the uprising?

The Soweto uprising of 1976 placed students in the forefront of the battle against apartheid. Over the next decade and a half students and youth continued to play this vanguard role, for which they bore the brunt of state repression. The state's banning of Black Consciousness student organisations failed to halt the emergence of vibrant and militant student movements.

In 1979 student struggles entered a new era with the establishment of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the Azanian Students' Organisation (AZASO), which organised secondary and tertiary students respectively. AZASO initially agreed with black consciousness ideas, while COSAS aligned itself strongly to the Congress Movement. In fact, COSAS was established by former political prisoners who had become underground ANC operatives. One of these was the first president of the organisation, Ephraim Mogale. COSAS's public association with the ANC brought it quickly into conflict with the state, which detained its senior activists at the end of 1979. Despite these setbacks, the student movement continued to march ahead, continually educating, organising and mobilising its constituency against the rapidly deteriorating conditions in the schools.

By the late 1970s most schools in black areas were already in the midst of a serious crisis. They were overcrowded and in varying states of disrepair, educational and recreational facilities were mostly absent, the majority of teachers were either under-qualified or unqualified, principals tended to be authoritarian, and corporal punishment was an integral part of the culture of the schools. Overcrowding in East Rand schools probably reflected the national situation. In Katlehong in 1978, between 50 and 88 students crammed into single classrooms. In Thokoza the number climbed as high as 96. The situation worsened in the early 1980s as the number of black students enrolled in secondary schools rocketed to over a million. As a result, the number of failures in Katlehong schools surged from 2 336 in 1979 to a staggering 41 627 in 1983.

Increasingly, students refused to accept these intolerable conditions. The school boycotts of 1980, which originated in the Western Cape, saw thousands of students protesting against the deteriorating conditions in schools. Mass marches occurred all over the peninsula and Student Representative Councils (SRCs) were established in most schools. A "Committee of 81", made up of leaders from the secondary schools, led the boycott. The boycott soon spread to the rest of the country. It was particularly strong in the Eastern Cape, where it continued well into 1981. The police intervened with characteristic brutality to put down these protests. Many student activists were detained.

Although COSAS did not play a leading role in these struggles, it benefited from the politicisation of large numbers of students. COSAS's
Kgothe vividly remembers the adverse conditions at his old school:

"Those days conditions were very harsh at Mazambane primary school. The school I attended was barely a classroom. As a result, some classes would basically attend at church. It was not a regular classroom. The teachers were not sticks, but they used corporal punishment. The students were not able to accept it. It was the point for us as well."

"A key demand was around corporal punishment, because these teachers used corporal punishment. They used to say, 'you go anywhere, which was difficult for students to accept. It was the point for us as well.'"

"What factors contributed to the township uprising?

Apartheid had consigned the black population to racially-defined townships, which were characterised by deepening socio-economic difficulties, spiraling into a full-blown crisis from the early 1980s. After the government had established the huge dormitory townships in the 1950s and 1960s, it invested very little money in the further development of those areas, preferring to prop up the new bantustan administrations. As a result, almost every aspect of township life suffered.

The housing crisis

Perhaps the most graphic illustration of the crisis was the rapidly developing housing crisis. For example, between 1973 and 1979 fewer than 7,000 houses were built on the East Rand — less than 100 houses per year in each township. During that time the urban African population had nearly doubled. In Katlehong, the East Rand's largest township, the population increased from 95,000 to approximately 200,000 between 1970 and 1980. The result was a massive housing shortage. In Katlehong the official housing waiting list in 1981 stood at 4,000. The situation was aggravated by the mass influx of people escaping the grinding poverty in rural areas. The number of shanty dwellings grew rapidly. The number of backyard shacks in Katlehong grew fourfold (from 8,000 to 34,000) in the short space of two years. In Soweto the number of families living in shacks had increased to 23,000 by 1982. Similar situations existed in most townships across the country.

Sjambok — a long whip, originally made of rhinoceros hide; consign someone to — to put someone in a certain place in order to be rid of them."
What happened during the township uprising?

From the late 1970s, workers and youth began to forge a militant alliance against what was identified as the "common enemy" — the state and bosses. In 1979 workers and the community mobilised a boycott of Colgate-Palmolive products to support the workers' demands for recognition of their union, the Chemical Workers Industrial Union. So successful was the mobilisation that management gave in the day before the strike and boycott were scheduled to begin. In 1980 youth mobilised support in the communities for meat workers who were in dispute over the recognition of democratically-elected workers' committees. The red meat boycott enjoyed considerable success. Similar solidarity campaigns were organised in the Fattis and Monis and Wilson Rowntree disputes. At the same time, a number of worker leaders such as Moses Mayekiso, Chris Dlamini, Sipho Kubekha and Sam Ntuli became more involved in community struggles and were instrumental in the formation of civic organisations on the East Rand and Alexandra. Also, some students who began their political careers in the education struggles of the late 1970s and early 1980s joined the union movement as organisers and activists.

A key moment in the mobilisation against apartheid was the launch of the United Democratic Front on 20 August 1983. The UDF was explicitly Charterist and united nearly 600 organisations under its banner. The front was created to oppose elections to the Tricameral Parliament in coloured and Indian areas, but it was soon transformed into the leading liberation movement in the country.

Most unions decided not to affiliate to the UDF, in order to safeguard their independence. A handful of unions, like the South African Allied Workers Union, did join the UDF. Nonetheless, a relatively close relationship developed between the UDF and FOSATU, although it was often strained by political and strategic differences. FOSATU threw its weight behind the Tricameral boycott campaign.

The successful boycott of the Black Local Authority Elections, the mounting student boycotts, the strike wave of the early 1980s, the launch of the UDF and the proliferation of local community organisations signified a critical change in the national political situation. The political pressure that was building from the late 1970s eventually exploded into a mass rebellion in the PWV.

The regional insurrection started in the Vaal townships in response to the Lekoa Town Council’s announcement of a rent increase of R5,90, despite overwhelming evidence that residents could not even afford the existing rents. The Vaal Civic Association led the protests against the Town Council throughout August. On September 2 it was decided that residents should refuse to pay their rents. The stayaway the following day was supported by up to 60% of the workforce. The police reacted viciously to the demonstrations in the townships that day. Scores were injured, and 31 were killed. The fires of resistance quickly engulfed other townships in the PWV. In Soweto, the Release Mandela Committee called for a stayaway in solidarity with Vaal residents. The action was not well organised, however, and only 30-65% of workers heeded the call.

From this point on, the centre of the struggle shifted to the East Rand. In October COSAS in KwaThema mobilised parents to support student demands. At a meeting held on 14 October and attended by 4 000 people, a parent-student committee was established to lead the struggle. Significantly, leading trade unionists, including Chris Dlamini (the president of FOSATU), sat on the committee. After failing to get a positive response from the government, the committee called for a stayaway. The local stayaway of 22 October was a resounding success, as more than 80% of workers stayed at home.

Factory-based struggles and worker militancy were also on the increase. In the first ten months of 1984, almost 120 000 workers were involved in 309 strikes (more than double the number of workers involved during the same period in 1983). The relationship between unions and communities was further cemented by the Simba Qux boycott campaign that was launched in August 1984. The scene was set for a major demonstration of union-community power.

The showdown with the state came to a head in November 1984. The initiative came from COSAS, which called on unions to support its struggle. The FOSATU Central Committee met on October 19-21. It resolved to support the students in their demands and also mandated the representatives from the Transvaal to represent FOSATU on the Stayaway Co-ordinating Committee. Seven union representatives were nominated, including Moses Mayekiso, Chris Dlamini and Bangilizwe Solo. The Transvaal Regional Stayaway Committee was formally constituted on 27 October and comprised 37 organisations. The four-member co-ordinating committee was made up of Moses Mayekiso, Themba Nontlane, Oupa Monareng and Thami Mali. It was decided to call a regional stayaway on 5 and 6 November. Numerous meetings were held in factories, schools, townships and hostels. More than 400 000 pamphlets were distributed. In addition to supporting students' grievances, the Stayaway Committee called
for the withdrawal of the army from the townships and for a suspension of rent and bus fare increases.

The regional general strike was a phenomenal success. More than 800,000 workers and 400,000 students stayed at home. Support for the action was particularly good on the East Rand and in the Vaal because of the strength of the unions in those regions.

What happened after the uprising in the PWV?

The state responded to the PWV uprising with even more repression. In October thousands of troops poured into the Vaal townships during “Operation Paimie”. From this time onwards, the occupation of townships by the security forces became a common feature of the country’s landscape. Scores of union and student activists were arrested. On 21 March 1985, the anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre, the police killed more than 20 people in Uitenhage’s Langa township. The Langa massacre reflected the growing brutality of the security forces in their attempts to quell mass movement against apartheid. In July the state went a step further by declaring a State of Emergency in 36 magisterial districts in the PWV and Eastern Cape. In August it banned COSAS.

The state’s clampdown merely added fuel to the flames of resistance. The success of the November stayaway spurred other regions into action. Scores of local authority councillors were forced to resign, rendering ineffective the government’s experiment of shifting the political responsibility for unpopular policies onto conservative local politicians. Rent boycotts became extremely common, and consumer boycotts were launched in the Eastern Cape. From the perspective of the authorities, the townships had become ungovernable.

Communities across the country set up street committees or organs of “people’s power” to run the townships. By the end of 1985 virtually every urban township had become part of the insurrection. Increasingly, smaller towns and rural areas were drawn into the mass movement. School boycotts continued unabated and youth organisations were also increasingly drawn into direct confrontations with the armed forces.

Perhaps the most significant event of 1985 was the launch of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which grew mainly out of FOSATU. COSATU was by far the largest and most powerful union movement in the history of the country. It immediately stamped its authority on the liberation struggle by simultaneously tackling key workplace issues and challenging the state. It called massive general strikes over the following years, involving millions of workers. By the mid-1980s it had become apparent that the end of apartheid was in sight.

References
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