

NUPSAW

NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC SERVICE & ALLIED WORKERS

Head Quarters

Nupsaw House, 814 Church Street, Eastwood Pretoria 0083

PO Box 11459, The Tramshed, 0126.

Tel.: 012 342 1674 FAX: 086 662 4362 E-mail: generalsecretary@nupsaw.co.za



NEWSFLASH

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The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising | South African History by Mandlenkosi ka Phangwa

In figuring a proper historical background of South African history particularly within the apartheid regime, one of the important issues that has arisen is that of June 16 1976. The question that arises is one that entails the political influences that led to June 16 uprising. In recent times many have claimed to have directly influenced the events that led to the June 16 Soweto students' uprising and thus trying to claim an undue trophy. However, if the truth must be told, there is no empirical evidence to support their claims that they indeed influenced directly or indirectly the events of June 16 1976. The ANC through its Secretary General, Mr M. Makhathini, disowned the events on the, a day after its outbreak, he made disparaging remarks about the events of the day before.

Members of both the then banned ANC and PAC in the country had to find ways of supporting a revolution they did not prepare or even in some instances, anticipated. There was no doubt in terms of content, form, imagery and language as to who were the true initiators of June 16 which marked a new turn in the politics of resistance in South Africa.

It changed the form of protest as it had been known in South Africa and put challenge and confrontation on the agenda. Black people were no longer going to wait for the benevolence and magnanimity of their oppressor but were going to force their hand in fighting for their liberation. That was the essence of June 16th 1976.

It was not a spontaneous uprising but the direct result of arduous and unrelenting work in the Black communities through political work, community projects such as Zanempilo Clinic, Zimele Trust and a host of many others throughout the entire length and breadth of the country, cultural activities that included poetry and drama, above all the self-affirming message of Black pride and expression killed the dragon of inferiority amongst our people. All these were the building blocks of the June 16th 1976 uprising – the watershed moment of our history.

The uprising of June 16th 1976 whetted our people's appetite for freedom and in the history of our country there has never been a defining event like it. All these were happening because of the initiatives taken by the Black consciousness movement and its Black consciousness philosophy. This movement though it did not show any hostility to the two organisations that preceded it, the PAC and the ANC, however, it was an independent movement under its own leadership.



To properly grasp this let us consider some of the most critical historical facts concerning June 16, firstly it was high school students who led the uprising, students from local township schools. Secondly the leadership of the students belonged to the South African Students Movement (SASM) which was a high school student organization that was formed by the BCM immediately after the formation of the South African Students Organization (SASO). SASM was greatly strengthened by the events that followed the expulsion of SASO members in Black universities following Onkgopotse Tiro's ground breaking speech at the graduation ceremony of the University Of The North commonly referred to as Turfloop University in 1972. Thirdly Tiro and all other Black Consciousness Movement members were expelled at universities and became teachers in most secondary schools most particularly in 1972 and years later. Considering their activism at university under SASO and the Black Consciousness philosophy, they were able to politicize many students under their care.

The teachers in these high schools introduced many projects geared at creating political awareness amongst their students. A generation of radical and angry SASM high school members emerged. They were always willing to confront racist white people in what were their traditional comfort zones especially in the cities. They could be easily identified by their long uncombed hair and what was commonly referred to as the SASM FROWN.



They were like angry and snarling black panthers ready to pounce. They were beautifully Black, they were Steve Biko's children. They had imbibed the philosophy of 'no compromise with the system at whatever level'

The acute shortage of teachers in Black schools throughout the whole country created fertile ground for the SASO activists. Many students who had not heard of the older organisations were drawn to the politics of the Black Consciousness Movement. This then enabled the spreading of the Black Consciousness philosophy throughout most high schools in the land.



There is indeed overwhelming and irrefutable evidence that clearly traces June 16 as a Black Consciousness historical moment and the clear crystallization of its tenets which are: self-reliance, self-dignity and most of all overcoming the fear that the white racist regime system had long used to suppress and exploit the Black majority. The heroic children of 1976 were unwilling to wait forever for their liberation, they were willing to do whatever it took to achieve it, even if it meant laying down their lives.

I must state that SASM led the June 16 1976 student uprising through their 'action committee' which they had just setup and was led by Tsietsi Mashinini, a SASM leader at Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto. Tsietsi, the best known and face of June 16th 1976 was a very able and articulate young Black Consciousness adherent who, even in exile refused to join any other liberation movement. He was privileged to have been taught history at Morris Isaacson by the man who had first set the pace for Black student protests – we are referring to none other than Onkgopotse Tiro himself. I have several times explained the fact that SASM did not form itself, as our detractors would like us to believe, but was formed by Black Consciousness exponents to serve at high schools just like SASO at tertiary institutions.

Having given this background one has to turn to the uprising itself which was characterized by chants and symbols for black solidarity. The first public address by Tsietsi in Mofolo opposite the shop belonging to Mrs Sally Motlana, wife of Doctor Motlana immediately clarified the fact that the event was led by the Black Consciousness Movement. His first slogan was: **BLACK POWER! AMANDLA! ONE AZANIA! ONE NATION!** This was undoubtedly the language of only one movement, the Black Consciousness Movement.



These developments reminds one of another great social upheaval in October, the 1917 Bolsheviks Revolution in Russia, the workers and the people rose on the basis of the slogan popularized by the Bolsheviks, the slogan: 'LAND, BREAD AND PEACE' and even though the best known and the most prominent Bolsheviks leaders were not immediately at the forefront the slogans used had already branded it as an uprising, a revolution inspired by the Bolsheviks, and that created the necessary room for Lenin, Trotsky and their other comrades to assume leadership of the revolution they had built.

They were not being opportunistic, they had raised the slogans that the workers had identified with and taken as their own. Similarly in 1976 the Black Consciousness Movement had done the same. The Black Consciousness Movement also called for solidarity within the Black Community which made it easier for the people to identify their real enemies



There was no trauma that was caused by Black people on other Black people, they took the war to the enemy who was oppressing them.

This black solidarity is what made Black Consciousness Movement unique from other liberation organizations though having been impacted upon by their history. However, the fact of the matter is that it was the Black Consciousness Movement: that used the slogan “BLACK POWER! ONE AZANIA! ONE NATION!” – a call for the struggle for land and all power to the Black majority. Consider then that it was the students from these various high schools that shouted and chanted “BLACK POWER” and further used the upright clenched fist to demonstrate black solidarity. This further point to the view that indeed June 16 by virtue of historical facts was the product of the Black Consciousness struggles. Again the use of the term “Azania” which was first mooted by the PAC but undoubtedly popularized by the BCM clearly showing the profound influence of BCM on the students. The known and traditional symbols that define other liberation movement were never used in funerals or mass rallies that took place in the period of June 16 1976 and after, largely because the majority of the young people who belonged to the BCM were in no way exposed or influenced by these organisations.

Some of the members of the older organisations who participated in the activities of 1976, like Mrs. Winnie Madikizela Mandela, spoke and acted in the same way as members of the BCM. For instance when Mrs. Mandela spoke at the funeral of the martyred Mdluli in Durban, she said it is not only his family who had lost a son but it is Azania that has lost a beloved son. The influence of the BCM was so pervasive.



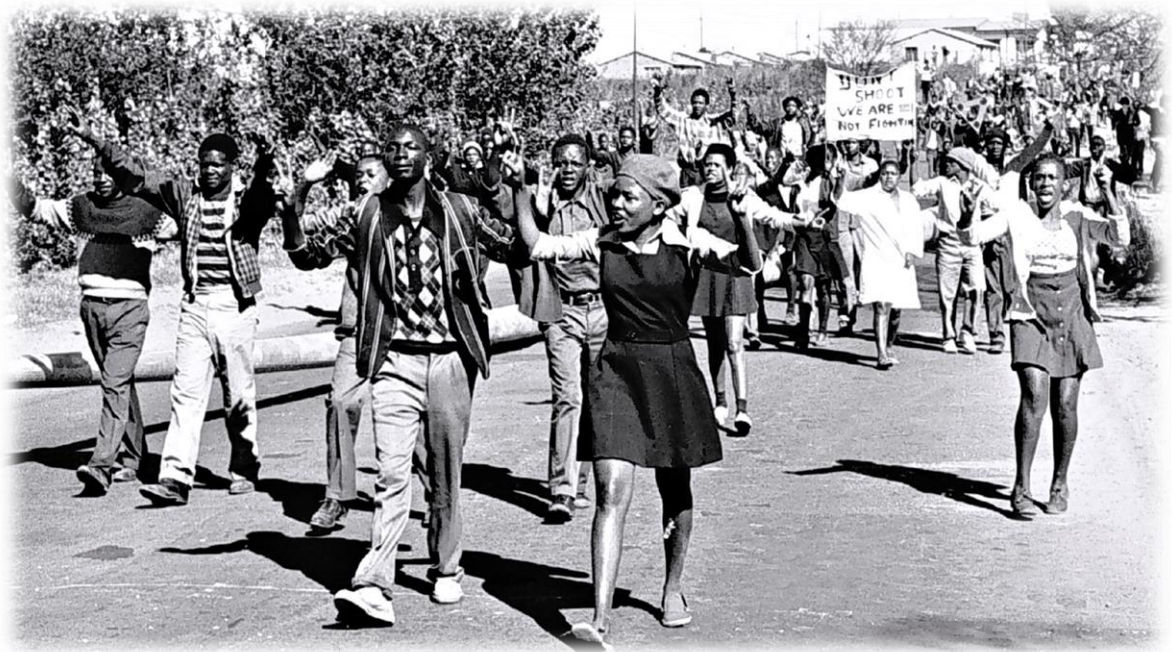
Steve Biko who at the time was the face of the Black Consciousness Movement when asked about the defining achievements of the Black Consciousness Movement, Biko responded in one word SOWETO obviously referring to the SOWETO Uprising. He further stated that the students’ uprising demonstrated the full tenets of Black Consciousness which allowed them to overcome their fear and as a result they bare handedly confronted the full might of a police state.

Furthermore when Lybon Mabasa who is currently the president of the Socialist Party of Azania (SOPA) was called as a defense witness at the SASO/BPC trial at the Palace Of Justice in Pretoria on the June 17 1976 exactly a day after the Soweto uprising. The State Prosecutor Mr. Reese, the first question he asked was: "What happened in SOWETO yesterday Mr. Mabasa? When asked by Boshoff the presiding judge concerning the relevance of the question to the matter at hand and the men before trial, Reese stated that those on trial were responsible for the uprising that was sweeping the country. Making then, a linkage between what was going on in the country, including the event of 16 June 1976 with the Black Consciousness Movement.

He pointed out that the Soweto students were clearly influenced by the teachings of the accused and they were using the same language, the same signs and were also showing defiance by raising clenched fists and shouting Black Power! Amandla! and One Azania! One Nation! – the latter being as a matter of fact part of the BPC logo – Steve Biko was the honorary president of the BPC.

In the final analysis we are not saying that we do not recognize the efforts of other older political organizations concerning the liberation of South Africa/Azania. In fact we recognize them but concerning June 16 it is clearly based on facts that it was the Black Consciousness Movement which single handedly led to the event of Soweto 16 June 1976. There could have been no politically conscious person who could have remained neutral under such circumstances. It is not in our nature to claim events, we would have been even more happy had we claimed victory.

A lot of experienced and thoroughbred leaders and activists who cut their teeth in other organisations responded to the challenge and offered whatever assistance they could give and the country will forever be thankful to them. However, it does not change or underplay the leading role of the Black Consciousness movement.



The question that often comes up is, was it possible for one to correctly predict events that preceded June 16 1976? The truth is several people did, because the situation had become almost impossible to remain the same. It often correctly said that a revolutionary situation exist, if the ruled can no longer accept the old rule, when the rulers can no longer depends on ways and methods of the old rule and if there is a revolutionary party in existence. No doubt all these elements existed just before June 16 1976.

So, one needed not to have been a rocket scientist, to have been able to correctly predict the events around June 16 1976. As a matter of fact several people did. Among them was Credo Muthwa who claimed his knowledge came from a higher power, though the reality was the overwhelming evidence was here on earth. The other was Collins Rammusi, who was a leader of the official opposition in the Bantustan of Lebowa. He actually made a statement to the effect that the country was going to go in flames. So strong was his conviction on the matter that he even went to see the SASO/BPC trialists at the 'Palace of Justice' in Pretoria. Days later he went to exile in the U.S. and the country did go in flames. Their knowledge did not qualify them to claim that they had organized the events. They were themselves overwhelmed by the events before their eyes, by the movement that was the Black Consciousness Movement.



Leaders of the PAC, particularly its president, the irrepressible President Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, uncle Zephaniah Mothopeng, Ntate Madzunya and a host of other unsung heroes played a major role in assisting and advising the young BC adherents. They had seen it before, they were at the very heart of the demonstrations that produced another important milestone in the history of the struggle, the 'Sharpeville Massacre'. They did not take over the role that was being played by the Black Consciousness Movement. They had a very close relationship with the movement including its leaders. Actually to be precise and exact June 16 Soweto uprising was a voice and manifestation of Black Consciousness as a philosophy, ideology and as a movement. Given the historical facts given in this article it is then not true to say that then Soweto uprising was the underground work of comrade Zeph Mothopeng and the cell system he networked around the country. As a matter of fact the Soweto uprising was a direct attack on the system, the apartheid regime, by the Black Consciousness Movement.



The methods of permeating the philosophy of Black Consciousness may have been underground, through the teaching posts of Black Consciousness members who taught at Soweto high schools but the aim was that of a direct attack on the system. Making it then, logical for Steve Biko to rightly state that the catalyst of the 1976 Soweto students uprising was the Black Consciousness Movement and its formations.

Finally the Kempton Park Eleven, the Soweto Students Representative Council members who were arrested and charged with sedition daily entered the court with their clenched fists raised high singing 'Azania hikhaya lami engilthandayo, ngizo wulwela umhlaba wami uze ukhululekee,' these were people at the forefront of the June 16th uprising, the real faces of the moment. Their every action was consistent with the teachings of the BCM. The Apartheid system appointed Cilliers Commission laid full blame of June 16 on them and the Black Consciousness Movement.

In giving Azania/South Africa a proper and concise history such rich facts of history must be retained in order to do justice to history. More so it gives a clear picture of the role, tactics and efforts that the Black Consciousness used in the quest for liberty and freedom. One point which I believe is of utmost importance is that June 16 was spear headed by the youth in high schools, this point ties well with the relationship between SASM and SASO under the philosophy of Black Consciousness and the fact that both movements (which in essence are one movement) were youths. Black Consciousness unlike other organization resonated well with the youths including high school students, this is clearly seen in the people involved in the Soweto uprising which were the youths.

We must remember that the PAC and ANC had already established military wings trained and prepared to fight against the Apartheid regime and it would have been disingenuous of them to plan, organize and execute something so huge and not do anything about collateral damage thus allowing Black children to die under a hail of bullets without providing them with guns to advance and defend themselves.



There is no doubt that they fully supported the struggle launched by the Soweto students and the BCM but they did not organize it and there is no empirical evidence to support the view. Besides, the thousands of young people who fled the country and went into exile and joined the PAC and the ANC, left the country not as members of the two organisations but were recruited by them while they were already outside of the country.

Mandlenkosi ka Phangwa