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APPENDIX 4

Paper by Charles Nupen:

"Guidelines for Student Action in 1974"

NUSAS supports the concept of black consciousness as a means of fighting for a "just and open society", yet do we fully understand the concept in the South African context, i.e. its implication for white student action. NUSAS sees a role of white students as supportive of black initiatives, yet some of our activities in the field of labour have appeared to initiate development in the black sector; endorsement of black consciousness offers to the white student activist the possibility of an alternative role as the propagator of "white consciousness". Yet we have not examined the relevance of this position to change nor have we actively pursued it.

In an attempt to clarify an ideological position for the white student activist we have, had papers delivered on Black Consciousness and its implications for white student action, and the relevance of students working within their own community. The paper on NUSAS, its past successes and failures has been delivered in the belief that an historical perspective of student action is vital for future planning. As a development of these three themes this paper suggests guidelines and a methodology for future student action.

ASPIRATIONS AND REALITY

NUSAS has aspired primarily in recent years to the position of agent for change in S.A. working towards the establishment of a "non-racial free and open society".

The project orientation of the past three years, designed to initiate student action and involvement, constitutes a positive advance on the rather fruitless "defence of fundamental freedoms".

Yet as an efficient pressure group for change, the National Union has not come up to the mark. Let us examine briefly why this has occurred. NUSAS delineates three avenues for continuous student action:

a) The Social Action Department, NUSWEL, characterized mainly by the work of the Wages Commissions: Herein lies some of the most relevant activated research done by students; possibly not so much for its quality and comprehensiveness, but because the work reveals the incredibly exploitative nature of white capital and in so doing attempts to strike at the root cause of racial domination in S.A. At the moment the research is designed to appeal mainly to reason and the moral sensibilities of the industrialist and the public, and this accounts for its impact on foreign companies and industrialists and its failure to motivate their S.A. counterparts. With the concomitant development of worker organisations and independent black trade unions, this research will become more relevant because it will have a dynamic power base from which to be utilized.

b) The Education Department, NUSED, decided at the 50th Congress that its major thrust would be towards education reform through course re-orientation, believing that university courses cater in the main for the standards and values of white bourgeois society rather than the vital needs of a developing country. As far as I can ascertain, there has been very little research into the extent to which the English language university is tied to a particular direction by Government subsidy and independent white capital, let alone defining and effecting course re-orientation in various departments.

c) The Culture wing, Aquarius, has proved relatively successful in terms of organisation, but doubt exists over the relevance of its workshop orientation to change, or more fundamentally, whether one can attempt to effect change through the cultural medium. Even if one accepts the pluralist viewpoint of emphasizing white cultural domination rather than white economic domination it is difficult to see radical change arising out of an isolated cultural process.

d) Another avenue for student action is the campaign. Here the ideal has been to mobilize students around an issue and to raise their own consciousness through involvement i.e. politics of experience, raise the consciousness of the viewing public by drawing attention to a specific issue(s), and channelling the energies of the students into projects and programmes towards the end of the campaign.

In the past success has depended on the campaign focus and the circumstances in which it took place. In the "don't celebrate apartheid" campaign at the time of the Republic Day Celebrations, involved students had to contend with the brutal realities of fervent Afrikaner nationalism to put their point across, and in the free education campaign, the brutality of police batons. The violence of the society and the consequent relevance of their cry for change was brought home much more forcefully than say this year's Labour Campaign which finally, because of its lecture hall flavour, was of little more than academic interest to the majority of student participants. Had the situation been different i.e. had the students campaigned for R30 a week and independent Black Trade Unions in the streets at the time of the Durban strike, the impact and conscientizing process would have been more significant.

Whether the consciousness of the viewing public is raised by campaigns is dubious. Laurie Schlemmer's research into the effect of student protest on the white public in Durban indicates that certain sectors accept the relevance of the student message but there is strong evidence to suggest that it only results in what Karel terms "consciousness upon consciousness" i.e. an awareness of the message but doing nothing in terms of it.

The oft-repeated call by student leaders to the participating students rarely results in many becoming involved in projects, primarily I think, due to poor organisation and the present temporary nature and suspect motivation of white student commitment.

It appears then that there is much to be done to advance the white student movement. The time has come for frankness if we are to build for the future. After three years NUSAS must emerge from the excusable dilemmas of its formative period of project orientation. We must ask ourselves frankly whether we have the guts and the dedication to become a really effective pressure group for change. This depends on a number of factors:

1. Clear direction and a clearly defined long term goal

Prior to reassessment when NUSAS inclined to ad hoc protest action and to "talking", students talked in ideal terms of fighting for the creation of a "free and open society", of the need for "radical change", the necessity to work towards the establishment of a "non-racial democracy" and an egalitarian, non-exploitative society". Today we still talk in those terms, we have projects purportedly aimed at their realization and it is precisely because of this that we increasingly realize the full import of their vagueness.

What precisely are the implications of the term "radical change" for white student action; what kind of society would be best suited to the egalitarian non-exploitative ideal, socialist or capitalist?

It has become necessary to cast aside vague epithets and substitute them with a more detailed, more specific and concrete conception of the type of society we want. With a definite goal we can assess the relevance of our activity and critically examine its direction. This blueprint could well provide for young South Africans a more palatable alternative to the kind of systems which the existing white political parties have to offer.

2. Effective organisation and greater commitment:

Any movement loses motivation and achieves sub-optimum results if it is badly organized. Local committee organisation, recruitment, project planning and implementation need to be jacked up incredibly if NUSAS is to function effectively. We have got to break out of the "second quarter syndrome" of NUSAS activity and to establish it on a more permanent basis. This naturally will require greater zeal and determination on the part of student leaders and project directors than has been exercised in the past. Projects emanating from Congress must be followed up. The long vac must be utilized for planning for the year, while some projects can well extend through this period (note Border Areas research project during this December vacation).

Effective organisation and planning during this period will enable NUSAS to compete with organisations such as Rag for student interest and involvement during the first term.

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3. The importance of a theoretical base and strategy to non-continuous action:

Apart from the necessity of a clearly defined ideological base for ongoing white student action it is important that activity such as a campaign or protest have a sound strategy, a theoretical base and a link up with long term goals. As the action feasible and desirable in the circumstances, what effects will it have? In retrospect, the June 7th protests were rather a futile exercise in sentimentality. They attempted to rekindle student concern over the police baton charges a year previously, and more important over the banning of the NUSAS 8, when clearly students had not experienced as constructive or fulfilling the thorough process of reactive protest a few months earlier.

The student demonstration at Anglo-American Offices after the Carletonville shootings or on the arrival of the T.U.C. Delegation in Durban were more productive. In both instances students had an immediate goal, achieved something concrete (at Anglo-American an entry to the mines for literacy training, with T.U.C. a request to submit written evidence and to organize a meeting with Black Trade Unionists) and were able to see the relevance of their action.

The effective protest then is very much a question of sound thinking and strategy. It is good for student leaders to organise report back meetings with the same object as say Muhammad Ali would examine a movie of his fight with Joe Frazier to discover what aspects of the exercise were effective and where the weaknesses lay. There is nothing more depressing than the futile feeling of holding a banner in silent vigil protesting government injustice, suffering the humiliation of the occasional spit of a passerby.

4. Increased co-operation in project work:

One of the draw backs of the affiliate structure is that it has militated against inter-project co-operation. Certain attitudes prevalent at July Congress show how rigid structural differences can lead to factions within the National Union. Besides the positive aspect of promoting understanding which inter-project co-operation would have, in many instances it would facilitate the attainment of goals.

NUSED needs something more tangible than an explanation of the misdirection of courses in terms of the needs of a developing country, in order to affect course orientation. The Communities Commission would function more effectively if some of its projects were set as research work and field work by academic departments. The S.R.C.s' endeavours to gain student representation on governing bodies of the universities, in this instance faculty boards, would provide a power base to argue for course re-orientation. The three sectors working together would have a greater opportunity of achieving these goals.

One has seen over the past couple of years an attempt to break down the inhibiting affects of structure by emphasizing projects and commissions. Inter-project co-operation will give the National Union more of an identity as an integrated student movement as opposed to a rigidly structured organisation.

5. The difficulty of working in a vacuum:

We have attempted at this seminar to establish an ideological base for white student activists. Yet the movement for change in South Africa is very fluid characterised by the ebb and flow of breakdown and breakthrough. At one moment an articulate cohesive group advocating an ideology or a policy emerges, the next moment it is cut down by government action.

Thus although we may formulate a particular ideological position, it should be flexible to allow for changes in circumstances. Because of this fluidity, there is a need, too, for NUSAS to consult with other organisations, black and white, to define goals, areas of action and strategy.

Working in a vacuum can lead to conflict, suspicion and duplication of activity and one has little opportunity to gauge the overall thrust of the groups working for change.

6. The need to re-examine some traditional liberal approaches:

While the National Union, and with it English language student politics, have long since entered the political arena and experienced the blows of cut and thrust politicking, ideological buffeting and ruthless intimidation, we still tend to adhere to the traditional liberal approach of an appeal to a sense of fair play. This approach can neutralize student enthusiasm and can provide students with a wrong set of criteria by which to determine a course of action.

Take the motion (the traditional vehicle for an expression of group formal opinion) at a platform protest calling on the government to release X, or lift the banning order of Y, because the action taken against them is tantamount to a breach of the rule of law. This constitutes no more than an appeal to the moral sensibilities and ethical standards of a government which has neither; has no earthly hope of changing that decision and neutralizes student energy by calling on them to indicate support in a totally impotent manner. This vehicle is useless and should be discarded unless as an expression of united opinion it has a chance of influencing a decision e.g. that adopted at UCT calling on Oppenheimer to reconsider his position as Chancellor if he did not improve employment practices.

The liberal appeal to a sense of fair play has been used in other instances by student leadership as a criterion for determining a course of action. Inter student conferences present us with a clear example. We have refused to attend because black students have not been invited even though we know they will refuse and their attitude is clear: "whitay work within your own community".

Should not our criteria rather be, can we achieve anything from the conference in terms of our goals? In the South African context traditional liberal approaches and principles can be a bar to constructive action. We should be guided more by a radical pragmatism which will lead us to the root of the problems which confront us, and in terms of our appreciation of them will allow for flexibility in that it doesn't provide us with a set of principle-orientated criteria which frequently do not take cognisance of practical realities.

The days too, of the symbolic gestures with aging academics crowding protest platforms and even at times being called upon to direct the course of events, must pass. Student leaders and students must experience a renewed confidence and dynamism in their own ability to handle situations. We need student power and vitality as opposed to traditional tokenism. Student leaders at Head office, S.R.C. and Local Committee levels should redirect more of their energy to making contact with students on the campuses. Unnecessary prejudice exists against the National Union which can act as a bar to student involvement.

7. NUSAS and S.R.C. direction:

Against a background of decentralisation which emphasizes SRC participation in NUSAS, some SRCs by the nature of their increasingly heavy administrative burden are becoming less actively concerned with the goal of the National Union. Unless SRCs are prepared to respond more to the direction of NUSAS by redefining their roles I can envisage a real tension developing. By the same token, the National Union should respond positively to the internal requirements of the SRCs e.g. research into student representation on governing bodies, academic and residence fees will be really useful to SRCs and it is a task which the newly appointed administrative officer can undertake.

It will be noticed that government action against NUSAS which has had marked effects of its development has not been emphasized in this paper. We are subject to legalised violence and legalized repression and ironically, because of our chosen path to work within the law, are almost powerless to do anything about it. It seems we must regard government intimidation as an occupational hazard which must not be allowed to materially affect our direction.