

## APPENDIX 1

Paper by Geoff Budlender:

"An Historical Perspective of  
Student Action"

## NUSAS AND STUDENT ACTION - AN HISTORICAL EVALUATION

Geoff Budlender

This paper is an attempt to examine NUSAS and student action over the past fifty years - to evaluate past successes and failures, (and by so doing to suggest possible thoughts for the future).

I do not propose to examine the history of NUSAS in detail - (I assume we all have a working knowledge of that), and I shall only summarise it briefly, and point out relevant highlights.

I should also, at the outset, clarify what I mean by "student action". This is usually understood as being in clear distinction from "talking", and it is generally accepted that the recent history of NUSAS is a movement from talking to action. But what sorts of action are there?

1. Service action: By this I mean things such as the Medical scholarships, general loans and scholarships, and prison education. This year, we have distributed about R25,000 in this way. The essential point about this is that it is essentially an administrative function. It may be "relevant to social change" it may invoke the wrath of government (eg Prison Education), and it may involve elements of other forms of action - but essentially it is an ongoing centralised administrative function, for which Head Office assumes the major responsibility.
2. Project action: By this I mean things such as Wages and Economics, Free Universities, Drama Workshops, and effectively most of the affiliate activities as they now stand. These are ongoing activities but they are decentralised to each campus or region, and do not take place in and from Head Office. They are subject to rapid change, are more flexible than "service" action, and do not simply serve (though they include that element - eg Wages and Economics), nor do they merely campaign (although they include that element - eg Free University).
3. Campaigning action: In my view, the valid post-1970 focus on "action not talk", and the resulting orientation towards projects, has tended to mislead us into viewing "campaigning" action as simply another form of "talk", and thus either irrelevant, or at best relatively unimportant. Examples of campaigning action are the fight against the 1959 university apartheid legislation and the 1971 Republic Day campaign.
4. The above three are the "front-line" forms of action - but there is another form, which is fundamental to all these, and which I will call leadership training. What I mean by this is the form of action that ensures the continued growth and development of the National Union, and the pushing into society of people who are committed to change. This therefore includes action that leads to change, growth and development in non-student organisations, and the extension of student influence to other areas of society. It does not mean just seminars - it includes protest and projects, and other methods of learning through involvement.

Obviously, these all interlink - and it is important that they should. However, we must have some analytical tool for evaluating student action - and I am therefore suggesting these four crude divisions as a basis. With this in mind, we can then go on to look briefly at the history of NUSAS.

The first clearly defined period is 1924 - 1933 : from formation to the withdrawal of Afrikaans universities, combined with the express exclusion of black universities and colleges (1934). In this period, the prime motive was contact and mutual understanding - and to the extent that an effect on the broader society was perceived, it was hoped to produce individuals with an understanding and tolerance of other (white) groups - i.e. leadership training.

1933 - 1939 saw the development of NUSAS as an all-white, all-English organisation, devoted to matters of "students as such", with no real expressed interest in society as a whole. The organisation was naturally fairly sterile, though certain welfare (i.e. service action) projects could be carried out.

1939 was a turning-point - NUSAS took a "political" stand on the war, reconciliation with the (pro-Axis) Afrikaans universities became clearly unlikely, and a start was made with the formulation of policy. During the war years, not much progress was made. Many of the more progressive students were fighting, and at times it appeared likely that student groupings at English-Language universities which were opposed to SA's entry into the war, might well gain majority support.

However, the end of the war saw an end to that. In 1945 Fort Hare was admitted, the NUSAS constitution was modified considerably to one far wider, including as objectives "to defend democracy" in various ways and "to encourage the promotional of educational and economic opportunity for all in South Africa with special attention to the under-privileged".

From here through to 1948, further developments of policy took place, including policy against university segregation, and opposed to academic and social segregation in student affairs (1948). NUSAS was strengthened on the campuses by the fact that it took a position of leadership, and it seemed set for great things. The Prime Minister accepted an invitation to open the 1948 NUSAS Congress.

By the time that Congress came, however, much had changed. The National Party - with segregation in education as a significant election issue - won the parliamentary elections, and the man who opened the NUSAS Congress in 1948 was no longer Prime Minister - he was now Leader of the Opposition.

From this time, conflict became inevitable, but NUSAS was unable or unwilling to see this and act on it. Perhaps "unwilling" is a better word - for already in 1954, the President (Ernie Wentzel) had stated NUSAS policy on a non-university matter - i.e. on the proposed introduction of, and Government control of, "Bantu Education". Wentzel, in his press statement, pointed out the close relationship between a "students in society" issue - Bantu Education - and a "students as such" issue - university autonomy.

But still, the basic position was "students as such". This is shown by the fact that NUSAS was invited to the Kliptown "Congress of the People" and declined, because it (NUSAS) was not a political organisation!

The result was that although all four forms of student action were possible, they were limited to purely student matters - and in practice service (to students) and leadership training (mutual understanding, parliamentary debating) predominated.

However, 1956 was to be in many ways one of the most significant of all. In that year, NUSAS commenced its defence of university autonomy in the face of Nationalist proposals for university segregation. For the first time, NUSAS started campaigning action - and it was highly organised, and in many senses highly successful.

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It is worth reviewing in some detail what happened in that campaign, for we can learn much from it and what I would stress at this point is that this was probably the most organised campaign NUSAS has ever run. The planning documents in NUSAS Head Office on this campaign are a complete revelation - they show a plan which was evolved from a clear understanding of the issues involved, of strategy, of tactics, and of the mechanics of organisation. Granted that in this case they had time to work with - but remember that this was the first-ever campaign on a "political" issue - previously, the question of black students in NUSAS had been expressly stated as being not "for any political reason, or any ideological reason" (see 1949 Executive statement).

In passing, I would say that I have seen only one other student campaign which even nearly matched this in its thoroughness, although it was of a radically different nature - and that is the 1971 Republic Day campaign.

In 1948 the new Prime Minister, Dr. Malan, had stated his government's support for the principle of university apartheid. In 1954, the Government announced its intention to introduce legislation to this effect. In 1956, Wentzel released an open letter of protest to the Minister of Education, protesting the pending legislation. The battle was on.

In March 1957, the Separate University Education Bill was published. A wave of student protest followed. This took the form of marches, daily picketing of parliament, and placard protests. The second reading took place on May 29, and a symbolic torch of academic freedom was extinguished. Towards the end of the session, the government announced that the Bill would be held over until 1958.

In 1958 two Bills were introduced - the Extension of University Education Bill and the Fort Hare Bill. New protests followed. It was also pointed out that because this was hybrid legislation - i.e. it affected public and private interests and rights - it should first have been referred to a Select Committee for the taking of evidence from interested parties. Once again, the Bills were held over to the following year.

Meanwhile, NUSAS had been responsible for a massive mobilisation of overseas protest. Support was received from Europe, Scandinavia, Britain, America, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Massive petitions were circulated among students and staff members, particularly in the U.S.A. This was probably the first major demonstration of external opposition to the policies of the South African government.

In fact, when the Bills were re-introduced in 1959 the overseas pressure was such that the Minister of Education felt obliged to state in Parliament that "the government will not be diverted from its course by anyone in the world". The 1959 protests in South Africa were also huge. There were marches through Johannesburg and Cape Town (in Cape Town, led by the UCT Chancellor, a former Chief Justice of the Union); there were repeated mass meetings and pickets; six petitions were presented to Parliament, one requesting that the Chancellors and Vice-chancellors of UCT and Wits be permitted to address Parliament. In Alice, Fort Hare students marched through the streets in protest against the Fort Hare Transfer Bill.

Finally, in June, the Bills passed the Senate, after lengthy debates in Parliament (one lasting 28 hours non-stop). The universities had been segregated - but NUSAS had been changed forever.

For this period saw NUSAS enter its first campaign action; and a further development was the first major "service" activity, the establishment of the SA Committee for Higher Education (SACHED), to provide black students who did not want to go through "Bantu Education", with degree courses through the University of London.

But even more than that, this period marked the entry of NUSAS into "politics"; and the change from "students as such" to "students in society" that followed was inevitable. Further, this period also marked the highpoint of black political activity, leading eventually to the banning of the ANC and PAC, and the driving of these and other organisations underground. When this happened, black students - who had largely concentrated their efforts in the Congress Movement - started to return to NUSAS in large numbers, having a considerable radicalising effect on the organisation. The result was that NUSAS became probably the most important effective and legal left-wing organisation in South Africa.

The result of this, in turn, was two-fold. In the early 1960's - particularly during the Presidency of Jonty Driver - new programmes were developed, in all fields. The other result was that for the first time, the government turned its attention seriously onto NUSAS - and in August 1963, Vorster (then Minister of Justice) launched his own personal vendetta against NUSAS, describing it as "a cancer in the life of South Africa which must be cut out".

The programmes developed at that point were interesting, in the light of my initial classification.

For example, a major service action project was launched in 1964 - the prison education project. It was set up primarily as a response to the mass arrests of students and others for political offences, though it was stated at the outset that all prisoners were to be eligible.

A new project action programme of this period was "CADET" - an ambitious community education and development project, which was in many ways the fore-runner of our present building and literacy programmes.

Campaign action was continued and intensified, on a wide variety of societal issues - eg. the General Laws Amendment Act ("Sabotage Act").

And the first comprehensive leadership training programme was started, with the first National Seminar at Botha's Hill in April 1963.

Shortly after this, the African Resistance Movement (ARM) was exposed. A number of past NUSAS executive members (Past President, Adrian Leftwich, and past executive members Hugh Lewin and John Lloyd) were shown to have been involved in acts of sabotage aimed at buildings and installations. A UCT SRC member, David de Klerk, was among those convicted, and there was strong evidence to suggest that another past President, Neville Rubin had also been involved in the ARM.

1964 nearly saw the death of NUSAS. The ARM, Driver's radical 1964 "Botha's Hill" address, and a major conservative onslaught in SRC elections all pointed to a rapid demise - even executive members tended to believe this.

However, due to a number of factors NUSAS survived. It had, however, been a close call, and what followed was a defensive and eventually calcifying period. At the same time, black students showed signs of moving away. This had already been noted by Driver in his Botha's Hill address, and he had urged action to take account of the fact that NUSAS was dominated by whites, who were members of a privileged and oppressing minority group. However, NUSAS could not deal with this problem - partly because of a rigid and essentially conservative approach, partly because there was no need as the major black student leaders remained in NUSAS.

So, until 1969, the organisation defended itself, survived - and stagnated. Student action followed the same course as it had before. Campaigning activity continued, but the issues were essentially responsive (banning, legislation) or tending to irrelevance (10-year commemoration of University apartheid). The result was sterility - although one should not ignore the significant effects of some of this campaigning. (eg banning of NUSAS President Ian Robertson revitalised the organisation).

1969 - 1970 was a period of organisation and activities. The way to more progress (Curtis, Nettles) for the service was more radical in the leadership of fruit.

Under these circumstances, action would not happen, and the expected, part

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1969 - 1970 was the year of NUSAS reassessment. The result was an organisation that had changed its style, its structures, and its activities. The establishment of affiliate organisations opened the way to more project action. Overseas trips by executive members (Curtis, Nettleton, Kleinschmidt, Pretorius) resulted in increased funding for the service activities. Campaigning was on different issues, with more radical methods, (eg "the 22" - 1970; Republic Day - 1971). And the leadership training activity was very active, and showed real signs of fruit.

Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that a new wave of government action would follow. It was already clear from late 1971 that this was to happen, and the Schlebusch Commission and bannings were only to be expected, particularly in the light of black political movement.

1972 did not see much progress - the June 1972 events, though of great significance, were largely the result of circumstances, and these circumstances were intelligently taken advantage of in some ways, and simply allowed to slip in others.

In 1973, however, NUSAS was ready for a further step forward. The head office executive was stronger than it had been for some time, and there was every sign of another year of major growth after a "holding" period. However, inadequate contingency planning - by which I do not mean inadequate detailed planning of contingency action, but rather an inadequate understanding by too many people in positions of leadership of what was at stake, what was likely to happen, and what the possible responses could be - led to a serious downsliding of the organisation from about May - i.e. about two months after the bannings.

One may indulge at great length in recriminations, self-condemnation and condemnation of others, but without getting to the root cause of the problems facing NUSAS at this point. But the overall impression with which I am left, after nine months as "quasi-President", is one of inadequate commitment by leaders, inadequate understanding of what is to be done, inadequate understanding of power, inadequate use of organisational and leadership techniques, and inadequate depth of leadership. It is a harsh statement and it may yet be too early to judge 1973. Only after 1974 will we be able to do this with real accuracy. It is also necessary to remind ourselves of the very real difficulties under which all were working, and the other achievements of the year - not the least of which is that for the first time in many years a sound financial base has been achieved. But when all that is said, one must remember what is before us, and realise the immense task that faces us now.

In looking at that task, I would suggest, we must focus on each of the areas of student action, see where we have succeeded and failed in the past, and learn from that for the future.

#### Service action:

We have achieved the following:

The medical and general scholarship programs are secured on a sound and safe organisational footing. They are distributing more money than ever before. This year, SAMST assisted over 60 medical students; we have now handed out well over R50.000 in loans since the loan scheme started.

SACHED has become an effective and self-sufficient organisation

The prison education program has handed out more money than ever before about R10.000 this year to prisoners and released prisoners. We are on the threshold of our first major expansion of this program, expanding into three vital areas: Namibia, the children of prisoners, and banned people.

We have also failed:

1. We have collected very little money from within South Africa for these programs
2. We have failed to publicise these activities adequately
3. We have lost touch with SACHED.

#### Project action:

NUSWEL has developed a major new thrust (wages & economics), based on a clear understanding of the nature of society and methods of change. But it has not enough trained personnel. The Communities Commission shows signs of developing into a new major thrust - because at the moment, what does NUSWEL do of importance other than Wages & Economics and a few local projects? What has happened to the literacy programme? And how does all this tie up with our attitude to black consciousness. Is there such a thing as white community development?

NUSED has failed to become a national campus organisation. Apart from the service projects, what does it do? To what extent have we changed those powerful instruments of society, in which we have most power - i.e. the universities? Have we made contact with those that are nearest to us - i.e. the schools? What are we doing about adult education?

AQUARIUS, after major personnel difficulties, has yet to define its direction in a comprehensible manner. It has run a major and successful Arts Festival - but where does it go from here? How does it relate to black consciousness and black culture? How does it relate to the schools? How does it relate to Afrikaans universities? Are we reaching other non-students, and can we? Is it promoting a real (as opposed to plastic pop) alternate life-style?

We should examine which projects have failed, and which have succeeded - and analyse the pattern that evolves.

#### Campaigning action:

Achievements here are manifold:

For a start, on a number of issues we have provided a focus and information for action by real friends of South Africa (ie by the friends of all South Africans) overseas - and their actions are beginning to tell.

We have succeeded in holding off some legislation (segregation of University clubs and societies) and in forcing the government to bring people to trial (the 22);

We have exposed the shallowness of the Republic Day celebrations, and exposed the real forces at work in SA by showing who has cause to celebrate, and who does not;

We have exposed the facade of democracy in South Africa, through campaigns such as the 22 and June 1972; but some other protests may, through the government's repressive tolerance, have reinforced that facade (see for example, Herbert Adam's "Modernising Racial Domination").

We have forced the beginnings of changes in education - look at the changes since June 1972;

We have exposed and brought to the surface, tensions in white politics (eg post-bannings)

And we have also failed:

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#### Leadership training

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We have raised the consciousness of students and others about various evils in S.A. - but we have failed to follow this through with coherent programmes and action;

We have shown up evils, and failed to make explicit the system underlying those evils; with a resultant lack of real understanding among those we have reached - eg how many of the people we reached in the labour campaign, still think the real problem is simply low wages?

We have tended to legitimise liberal democratic concepts in a society which does not know democracy - what is the purpose of "charge or release", if the Terrorism Act makes legitimate activities illegal?

We have not clearly articulated the alternatives facing South Africa, we have not exposed the essential triviality of most "white" politics.

Again we should analyse which campaigns have succeeded, and which have failed.

### Leadership training

NUSAS has continued to grow and develop policy in a rational and progressive manner;

No major centre has disaffiliated since the black campuses, and aside from those campuses there has been no sustained major disaffiliation since 1936.

We have succeeded in moving the campuses forward - eg the Intervarsity Issue at UCT and Wits, the question of segregated activities on campuses.

We have provided intelligent and trained people in the following areas: press, trade unions, SPRO-CAS, SAIRR, SACHED, universities, Black Sash, etc.

And we have failed:

Many of our best people still drop into white consumer society on leaving university.

Over the last few years, we have not provided people with leadership and organisational skills: after all they have learnt ideas (which is not to minimise how important that is - but they're no use unless you can use them effectively);

We have reached a stage where one of our campuses has no SRC, and there is no emergent leadership;

Our depth of reserves in leadership is low at the moment.

I can honestly say that I believe we have a great deal of which we can be proud. At this point, we are going through a difficult period - but who would not, under these circumstances? The fact remains: almost everyone around us has died or folded under the pressure.

And while others have folded, we have continued to move forward.

It is a fact, that particularly in white society we have often been the leaders:

On acceptance of real non-racialism in practice;

On non-racial sport;

On real dialogue between black and white;

On workers' rights;

On acceptance of black consciousness as a means of change;

On acceptance of majority - i.e. black - leadership

On support of a boycott of non-racial sport.

and one could go on for a long time.

The simple fact is that at this point in time, we are probably the most radical, effective, legitimate and mass-based white organisation in South Africa. And that is one good reason why we feel isolated.

The challenge that confronts us now, is to learn to apply new tactics in the circumstances that face us. We have to learn to be flexible - to strike, to withdraw strategically, and then strike again. That is the lesson of the guerilla. The lesson of the guerilla is that where you are faced with overwhelming force on the other side, you conserve your resources, and strike in ways which the giant cannot control or resist. You use the size of your opponent.

The other lesson of the guerilla is that you must be patient. The battle will not end tomorrow, or next week, or next month, or next year. The guerilla learns to be patient - and this does not mean inactive or submissive.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of NUSAS is that it has survived, and not surrendered. And that is no small achievement.