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The 1976 Struggle and the Emancipation of the Future

Developing Self-determined and Self-motivated
Youth Despite Looming Fate

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The massacre of South African school children in 1976 continues to be remembered and to influence us today. It showed the brutality of the apartheid state and it left scars still felt by people today.

In the period 1970–75 the number of black schoolchildren in the state system increased by 160%. However, the Bantu Education system and economic crisis meant already low apartheid expenditure could not meet the increasing need.

This was also the time of Steve Bantu Biko, a key intellectual influence through the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). The rising black trade union movement provided another source of inspiration after the defeats of the 1960s.

Black education faced a crisis: low funding plus a rising consciousness of black struggle amongst school students. These students felt the system unfair and highly oppressive. They demanded the right to a proper education, adequately equipped and staffed.

These changes, they said, would foster positive developments in their lives and those of their families. It must be remembered that this was the period when South Africa's unemployment crisis – still with us – began.

Students protested for instruction in their native languages, against the effort to use Afrikaans as the main language of education and for a proper curriculum.

In short, the changes they wanted were mental, social and not just about physical resources; the black working class was rejecting the system that kept it in bondage.

On 16 June 1976, students in Soweto, Johannesburg, decided to march to the Orlando Stadium to hold a mass rally. The march was initially peaceful and disciplined and sought to show disgust with the current repressive political, economic and educational systems.

Little did they know the violence they would face that day – the violence of the state through a section of its armed forces. The students, refusing to obey a police order to disperse, were fired upon indiscriminately: Hector Peterson, a small boy shot down, became the symbol of hundreds killed that day and in operations that followed. Prominent student leaders were tracked, structures were repressed; a general strike was called and the revolt lasted countrywide for many months.

We continue to pay homage to those brave young people whose courage paved the way for this and for future generations. It was their sacrifice that helped create the momentum that would result in important political changes in South Africa some 18 years later.

Have the youth of the current period of parliamentary democracy kept the radicalism and spirit of sacrifice of the 1976 generation? Or has 1994 served to phase this out, with media and market indoctrination (some of the main tools of ruling class propaganda)? Capitalist tendencies, such as mass consumerism, have engulfed black working class communities and are widespread through the use of modern technology.

Also, our youth are being ravaged by drug abuse, crime, gangs, HIV and AIDS which claims thousands of lives daily, in a context of massive unemployment. School dropout rates are high and rising, as is teen pregnancy; the prospects for finding work after school are dismal. Apartheid is gone, but its legacy remains in the townships.

Thus the challenges faced by youth today are different to that experienced in 1976. This does not mean everything has changed. We need to look to history to learn about and not to repeat mistakes made. The 1976 revolt lacked a clear direction – this is one reason it failed, despite its heroism.

But we also look to history to provide us with inspiration. We need to revisit the spirit of the youth of 1976 and copy their courage – to overcome these issues facing our young people today. We need to be the change that we want to see.

Not all our youth are blindfolded by ruling class propaganda. There are those that are trying to take control of their destinies. They are struggling to survive, but if we use the correct tools of struggle – ideas and action – we can create the change we want to see.

This means not falling for the lies of the system – consumerism, elections, dog-eat-dog – but fighting for a free society; one without bosses, without poverty, without oppression, based on human dignity and self-management.