

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

STUDENT POWER, ACTION AND PROBLEMS: A CASE STUDY OF UWC SRC, 1981-92

Sipho S Maseko¹

The desire to get the Student Representative Councils (SRCs) recognised at educational institutions constituted one of the key demands of student organisations during the mid-1980s. In the quest to secure the acceptance of SRCs pupils and students braved expulsion or suspension from educational institutions, and risked injury, detention, long prison sentences, and even death. Besides, the campaign for the recognition of SRCs became in itself an instrument of mobilisation in the struggle to end the poor quality of education for blacks, and ultimately to get rid of the entire structure of racial/ethnic and class domination.

Yet the outcome of the campaign was in various respects not successful, it did not produce the form of governance the students envisaged, that is, that students should take part in the decision-making structures. In many secondary schools the SRCs were never officially recognised by the education authorities. At some tertiary institutions such as the Universities of Fort Hare, the North and Transkei, the campaign was nominally successful or short-lived due to state repression and harassment, in collaboration with the authorities of these universities. At the University of the Western Cape (UWC) where the SRC had a longer life-span, its existence scarcely led to the representation of students within the governing structures.

This essay analyses the politics of the Student Representative Council at the University of the Western Cape between 1981 and 1992. It suggests two ways of conceptualising and explaining how the SRC performed its roles and functions. Firstly, the article contends that the UWC SRC operated as a platform to mobilise and rally students to conduct national politics on campus, since it regarded itself as a limb of the liberation movement. In this regard students' concerns such as high failure rate, accommodation problems, expulsion of 'racist lecturers', and the longing to participate in the running of the university, were linked with the broader national problem which needed to be tackled simultaneously. As will be shown later, this conceptualisation served mainly as a strategy to deepen the political contradictions within the university, and the crisis between the state and the contending forces, without necessarily expecting a positive settlement of these concerns under the existing social order. The approach also explains why the SRC never paid much attention to aspects of the

development of intellectual skills which a 'liberatory education' - an idea often expressed in leaflets and public statements - would impart. This view was upheld even when the SRC had acknowledged changes at the university after the installation of Professor Jakes Gerwel as rector in 1987. As one SRC leaflet explained in mid-1987: 'building a people's university doesn't mean that we can attain it within the present system'.

In retrospect, the strategy of subsuming the functions of the SRC into a centralised project of the national liberation movement, and thereby ruling out the need to simultaneously struggle for strategic reforms within the university governing structures and even recognising the changes in the university, resulted in the long run in the weakening of the SRC. This was evident when the SRC was unable to procure the required 25 per cent of the electorate for its legitimisation during the 1990 SRC elections. The South African labour movement in the 1980s, for example, demonstrated the viability of welding concerns obtaining in the workplace (eg collective struggles over wages, conditions of work, abolition of racial practices, and recognition of unions) with community concerns over rents, transport and local elections (see Fine and Webster, 1989:256-63; and Fine, 1992:22).

Secondly, the paper argues that during the process of its evolution the SRC attempted to build a hegemonic front, and at the same time serve as an instrument of domination. The hegemonic front aimed at establishing a consensual basis of a political-ideological discourse among students.² The hegemonic discourse was the 'non-racial' policy propagated by the Congress Alliance within the broad liberation movement. Domination was exercised in a manner which Anthony Giddens (1987:9) describes 'as a mode of control, whereby an agent seeks to achieve and maintain the compliance of others'. He further asserts that 'compliance' can be secured through the agent's 'capability to deploy a range of resources'.

The SRC exercised domination over student groupings such as the Release Mandela Campaign (RMC) that defied the 'vanguard' role of the Azanian Student Organisation (renamed Sansco), and the Azanian Student Movement (Azasm) and the Black Student Study Project (BSSP) which did not adhere to the political-ideological discourse of non-racialism. These organisations' resistance to compliance meant they could 'not be accommodated' within the SRC fold.³ To be sure, the SRC's authority to control resources was not originally intended for purposes of political domination. On the contrary, the control was meant for purposes of performing efficient administrative functions, such as avoiding clashes over the use of venues, and fair distribution of financial grants allocated to the student body at large.

Exclusion from the SRC fold entailed not being eligible to 'enjoy privileges'

that went along with being part of it. These, as stipulated in the SRC constitution, included being prohibited from using university facilities such as lecture theatres to hold meetings, using notice boards, and obtaining financial grants. At some stage the SRC went beyond the powers at its disposal. An ad hoc outfit that was neither a creation of the SRC nor a body accountable to it, nefariously called the 'disruption squad' operated as a 'law enforcement agency' to enforce SRC decisions, programmes and campaigns, involving the disruption of meetings of 'dissident' student groupings.⁴

These are the themes of the narrative of the essay. However, before discussing them, a brief historical background on the evolution of the SRC at UWC is essential.

A Short History of UWC SRC

The University of the Western Cape was established in 1960 as part of the programme of political and social restructuring of South African society along racial and ethnic cleavages by the National Party government. Laws such as the University Extension Act of 1959 prohibited black students from enrolling at traditionally white English- and Afrikaans-medium universities. As a third university in the Greater Cape Town, UWC was created to cater for 'coloured' students only. The other two institutions, the Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch, catered for English- and Afrikaans-speaking students, respectively.

The hallmark of UWC, like other black universities, was strict bureaucratic control and domination by Afrikaner nationalist intellectuals within the administrative and teaching personnel.⁵ UWC governing structures were fervently intolerant of student activism which was regarded as intended to challenge the existing status quo. Hence, during the first 20 year period of the existence of UWC students did not have a 'legally' recognised body to communicate with university authorities on student grievances and about the general functioning of the university. Consequently, students organised their activities 'illegally' through action and ad hoc committees.⁶ The suppression of students' desire to participate in university processes continued until 1973 when the students, inspired by the ideology of Black Consciousness, boycotted classes in protest against a host of structural grievances: restrictive university rules, hostel problems (such as food and visiting hours), the composition of Senate and Council, etc.⁷ Although these actions did not last long or precipitate immediate changes, they were important in raising the political awareness of students and exposing the apartheid ideological function performed by the university.

Three years later, UWC students joined in the solidarity boycott during the 1976 Soweto students' uprising. The latter's actions became a seed-bed of

students organisation and of more actions demanding that the university authorities officially recognise the existence of the Student Representative Council on the campus. In the meanwhile, in response to the 1976 uprisings, the state had begun to implement some reforms in the hierarchy of the university in order to give it a semblance of legitimacy. Professor Richard van der Ross was installed as the first black rector of the university. His first four years in office did not bring changes. Students still did not have a legal forum to channel their grievances, and conduct activities. In fact in 1977 the University authorities banned the students' Action Committee. In 1978 the rectorate warned students that while:

there is no ban on political expression at this University, provided it is done in an orderly manner... the University cannot allow meetings or any other activities which aim to disrupt the academic activities, either by upsetting time-tables, disrupting classes or tests, damage to property, or violence of any kind. Nor can any kind of disruptive activity be permitted even if it was not planned before hand.⁸

The warning was in response to the proposed draft of the SRC constitution, especially clauses (3.1.2 and 3.1.9), which envisaged the promotion of conducting 'extra-mural student activity at the University, cultural, or otherwise', and the holding of 'mass meetings of students and to conduct general referenda' and 'conduct surveys'. The rectorate interpreted these provisions as 'giving the SRC very wide powers, and also imposing certain *political responsibilities which might lead to the disruption of orderly functioning of the university*'.⁹

The authoritarian attitude of the university towards students changed in 1980 after the rectorate had outlined a future policy for the university which included, the rejection of the 'politico-ideological' grounds on which the university was established; the commitment to addressing the problems of those educationally prejudiced by the apartheid system; the ideal of a totally open university; and dedication to the cultural and socio-economic development of the Third World communities, particularly in the Western Cape.¹⁰ The partial policy shifts by the university were followed in the same year by another nation-wide school boycott supported by UWC students. The combination of these factors strengthened the emerging student movement on campus. Indeed, in the following year (1981) the first SRC was voted into office.

Structure and Functioning of the SRC

The first officially recognised Students' Representative Council took office in September 1981.¹¹ According to the constitution, 11 members would compose the SRC office bearers for a one year term upon which fresh elections would be

held. But by 1989 the number on the executive committee had increased to 17,¹² although this de facto amendment is not reflected in its present constitution. In fact this was not the only departure from the SRC constitution. The adoption of the non-racial policy in 1987 was also never formally recorded. This was partly because of the difficulty in raising mass meetings to draw 25 percent of registered students as required by the constitution for amendments.¹³ It was also partly due to the lack of respect for the constitution which became prevalent towards the end of the 1980s. Thus democratic practices conceived by the constitution were seriously undermined by SRC practice.

The constitution of the SRC envisaged the incumbent members of the SRC (a) performing the duties of representing students in the decision-making structures of the university, namely the University Council and Senate; (b) channelling student grievances to administrative authorities; and (c) acting on behalf of the UWC student community in meetings with students from other universities. These functions essentially suggested that the SRC would assume a trade union-like character of representing and protecting students interests. They also assumed the existence of a non-antagonistic relationship between the student government and the university structures.

However, the SRC deviated from the stipulations of the constitution and adopted a confrontational approach towards the university authorities. The new approach was largely influenced by the intransigence of the university authorities and the conviction that the apartheid origins and the interests served by the university placed the two parties on a collision course. Consequently, students argued that the functioning of the university could not be reformed but had to be radically changed. In the venture to transform the university the SRC opted to align itself with the broad liberation movement. As members of the 1983 SRC committee aptly stated:

We believe students are an integral part of the democratic movement in South Africa and that the SRC's role is to facilitate students' full participation in this movement, through educative programmes and taking part in [its] campaigns.¹⁴

The alignment with the 'democratic movement', as practice indicated, inadvertently meant that the SRC would sacrifice its independence. The programmes it undertook, often uncritically, reflected and were intended to enhance the positions propagated by the liberation movement. The real meaning of becoming part of the liberation movement was also never clearly spelled out. It might have been taken for granted that the SRC would be a non-partisan structure given the divergent political opinions of the constituency it represented. Moreover, students regardless of their political persuasion could compete for office during SRC elections. In addition, branch structures of student formations with a

national character such as the South African National Student Congress (Sansco) were affiliated to the SRC.¹⁵

In practice the execution of non-partisan programmes proved difficult. SRC programmes often indicated a political bias towards a position espoused by the majority of students on the SRC executive committee. In fact during the whole period covered by the present discussion, the SRC executive committees had been dominated by students aligned to the Congress Movement. There has never been a principled objection to this bias, simply because of the understanding that it came as result of votes canvassed by well-organised candidates or a student organisation on campus. However, from 1987 onwards the official non-partisan position of the SRC changed after Sansco seized absolute control of the SRC.¹⁶ The SRC now received 'direction and guidance' from Sansco and unequivocally espoused a partisan position.¹⁷

Another aspect of the SRC constitution that deserves discussion relates to conditions for registration with the SRC by clubs and societies.¹⁸ This is where the basis of domination referred to above lay. The constitution stipulates that no club or society shall 'enjoy privileges' unless it is 'registered with the SRC'. As a measure of checks and balances, the SRC decision to register or reject a formation would be ratified by the Students' Societies and Clubs' Committee (which became commonly known as the 'General Council').¹⁹ Its rights included the convening of meetings on the University premises, the use of notice boards (only notices signed by the SRC may be posted), and the allocation of financial grants.²⁰ When the SRC came under the control of Sansco (as we shall later see), the SRC's prerogative to decide which club or society could (or could not) qualify for registration was used as a method of exercising political domination.

1981-1986: linkage

The first two years of the formation of the SRC were marked by intense student debate on the importance of having an SRC on campus. As a result there was little political or any other activity on its part. The debate was between students who adhered strongly to the 'non-collaborationist' principle, a hallmark of the New Unity Movement tradition. This tradition was pessimistic on the efficacy of the SRC at a campus whose administration they mistrusted and regarded as hostile. Hence they argued that the SRC would merely be 'a puppet of the administration'. The other view argued that the recognition of the SRC provided space for students to conduct their activities in a legal way.²¹ Despite many debates, these different views were never resolved, only time and the actions undertaken by students settled the matter.

As noted earlier the SRC described its role as that of educating and mobilising students to take part in the activities of the liberation movement. In practice this

entailed linking students concerns on campus with community issues. There is no doubt that this approach furthered the Freirian idea of 'education for liberation'. Its application in the South African context - originally from the 1970s - argued that the struggle for better conditions in schools, colleges and universities should be conceived as inseparable from the struggle for national liberation (See Alexander, 1990:9). This notion maintained that the education system in South Africa, in spite of its obvious limitations, could be used as centres of mobilisation and of imparting intellectual skills which would be used to challenge the ideological foundations of the ruling class.

The first undertaking of the process of such linkage started in 1983 when the SRC coordinated the campaign against the elections of the tri-cameral parliament. The campaign was conducted in two complimentary ways. The first was setting up anti-election support groups, such as the Hostel Anti-President Council Unit (HAPCU). The latter specifically focused on mobilising resident students, who were in turn, trained to assist in organising rural communities from which many of the students came.²² The second leg was to embark on a propaganda campaign through issuing of leaflets and writing of articles to the local press. As one of the letters to the local press demonstrated:

[The Labour Party], by becoming the 'junior partners', by giving life to a bankrupt political structure, they have chosen their side in the battle for democracy. The struggle to put political power in the hands of the people as a whole, fundamentally to democratise South Africa, will continue through the mass-based organisations. It is only this process of mass-based struggle which will ensure the final abolition of apartheid system. The Labour Party through their participation can at best only help present the system in new ways and in a new guise.²³

However, the SRC had difficulties in performing the 'educative and mobilising' functions at the same time. Mobilisation to show support with the community, often through class boycotts, became its major function. The flaw in focusing on this aspect alone resulted to the student movement becoming reactive to the processes taking place in the community. Hence, after a campaign on community issues had been completed, the student movement usually went into a period of a lull. The SRC scarcely organised supporting and/or consolidating educative programmes which did not involve a boycott. There was also little done to address the immediate concerns such as shortage of accommodation, congested time-tables, and curriculum development, when, in actual fact, there was a chance to struggle for these reforms, which the state and university authorities might have permitted. This was indicated by the success of the National Union of South African Students (Nusas) curriculum development campaign in the

1980s that resulted in the introduction of courses such as Labour Law, African Literature, and Community Health at the mainly white universities.²⁴ Furthermore, the SRC programmes did not unambiguously show how student concerns were linked with community issues or other difficulties experienced by students elsewhere, which it wanted UWC students to support.²⁵ Thus, the resuscitation or sustenance of the student movement depended on the occurrence of other grievances.

The best examples of this shortcoming were demonstrated by the paucity of activities after the suspension of classes in 1982 in solidarity with Fort Hare students who were expelled after a demonstration against the visit of Chief Lennox Sebe to the campus;²⁶ the 1984 prolonged class boycott in support of the boycott of schools in Atteridgeville near Pretoria, Cradock in the Eastern Cape, and the Universities of the North (Turfloop) and Transkei;²⁷ the indefinite class boycott which started in July 1985 in solidarity with Department of Education and Culture (coloured) and Department of Education and Training (african) schools boycott in Greater Cape Town; and the 1986 class boycott in 'solidarity' with about six students who were helping with relief work during the burning of squatter camps in Crossroads.²⁸

The effects of carrying out programmes and campaigns in this manner began to show strains in later years as many students became loath to attend mass meetings where the outcome of 'solidarity action' to be taken became predictable. There was no doubt that the majority of students were not, per se, against expressing solidarity with affected communities or students elsewhere. They became indifferent to the boycott method because, contrary to its intentions, its consequences depoliticised and divided students. As a law student, Jimmy Albertus asked in 1988, however belatedly:

Why don't the SRC use newsletters to keep the student masses informed as to what is happening in the community instead of resorting to boycotts? Why is there no attempt at all through newsletters to politicise those students who display a lack of interest in community issues? Why does the SRC persist blindly in actions such as the boycott of classes? Are there no alternatives which they can examine or they are too ignorant to pursue them?

Albertus went on to issue a strong warning:

... if there should be a further series of pointless class boycotts it will eventually result in UWC dying a slow intellectual and academic death. UWC will lose top matriculants to other universities. Instead, of UWC becoming an intellectual home of the left, it will become a dumping ground for third grade students and lecturing staff.²⁹

When Albertus made his warning, he was apparently unaware of the distance the struggle for liberation had travelled. Although he made pertinent observa-

tions, they were seemingly irrelevant in the context of that time. According to the SRC, the struggle had entered another phase. As one leaflet asserted 'the South African struggle has reached a stage where the people are determined to intensify it until final victory'.³⁰

1987-1990: the era of revolutionary upsurge?

The notion that the situation in South Africa had entered a phase of 'revolutionary upsurge' was not only promoted at UWC, but it was also widely accepted in some quarters of the liberation movement. It is not the brief of this essay to pay attention to this aspect.³¹ Suffice it to state, that students as a non-class force could never become the main social instrument capable of overthrowing the ruling class. For a revolutionary situation to succeed, the struggle required the mobilisation of the classical revolutionary class - the proletariat. In this regard the students' role, as 'apprentice intellectuals', would be supportive, that is, by articulating the political discourse of the working class. In that way they would be assisting it in asserting and building its hegemony.³²

Nonetheless, the SRC's determination to 'intensify the struggle until final victory' entailed deepening the contradictions within the university. One of the strategies used was to embark on prolonged class boycotts in April/May and in September 1987 demanding the expulsion of 'racist lecturers': 'there is no place on campus for elements who openly side with the regime'.³³ Another strategy was (to use Alex Callinicos' phrase) to employ the politics of 'militant abstentionism'. This referred to the refusal to take co-responsibility in the running of the university while it was still under the control of an illegitimate South African state. Hence, the argument advanced by the leaflet quoted above, namely that building a people's university could not be attained under the apartheid system. Thus the appointment of a rectorate that was sympathetic to the students' cause was not seen as a creation of a space for the pursuance of strategic reforms within the university, but it was perceived as merely providing the space to conduct radical politics relatively unhindered. Lastly, the SRC discouraged any forms of theoretical debate on campus,³⁴ apparently fearing that this might distract students from executing the 'revolutionary' task at hand. Lecturing staff and students who tried to foster theoretical discussions were accused of being 'classroom theorists' or 'armchair revolutionaries'.³⁵

Despite the unrealism of students leading a revolution, the level of political maturity of the majority of students at UWC had not developed to a degree of being ready to support a radical programme such as insurrection. Thus most of them began to stay away from the SRC-sponsored meetings and withdrew their support for programmes such as class boycotts. Upon the realisation that the backing for its programmes was dwindling, the SRC resorted to coercive

measures to procure students support. These included arbitrary suspension of classes, closure of the library, the student centre, the cafeteria, the dining halls, and allowed the 'disruption squad' to use physical force against those students who did not comply. Hence mass meetings during this period became largely composed of a captive audience.

The result was the alienation and division of students which was later explained along ethnic lines. 'Coloured' students were accused of dissension, while African students were depicted as the militant group on campus. Professor Jakes Gerwel described African students as having

grown up with Casspirs and the soldiers in the townships and schools and with much more direct oppression and exploitation. They bring on campus a political experience in which activism is perhaps more emphasised, by contrast above all, perhaps, with a Western Cape tradition of theorising.³⁶

An internal Sansco document written towards the end of 1989 expressed, more or less, similar sentiments:

African students mainly expelled from other bush campuses... had a particular experience of student struggle, largely determined by conditions of those campuses. Administrations by and large were very repressive which required a particular approach. What we [African students] found [at UWC] was a clash of two political cultures: a militant and radical confrontationist culture of African students coming from other bush campuses, and a less militant more theoretical orientation of existing UWC organisations...³⁷

The ethnic (or is it a cultural?) explanation of the causes of student divisions was erroneous and remarkably simplistic. A plausible explanation lies in the structural changes on campus brought by the erection of more residences from mid-1986 and early-1987. These influenced the manner of mobilising students and how they conducted politics. Unlike in the past when most students were dispersed as daily commuters, there was now a sizeable number of students concentrated on campus residences.³⁸ This allowed relatively easy methods of communication and access to information on the methods of struggle to be employed. Hence, the majority of students who bore the wrath of the 'disruption squad' were the students (incidentally the majority being 'coloureds') who still commuted to campus on a daily basis.

The SRC's failure to properly analyse the causes of student divisions led to some reactionary elements on campus with the help of the state agents stepping-in to exploit and exaggerate these divisions. In 1988 numerous smear campaign leaflets were distributed and graffiti was sprayed on the walls of toilets and lecture theatres. Consider this example of a smear campaign leaflet:

UWC has become a real bush university... for reasons other [than]

its apartheid origins. It has not [only been] invaded by black monkeys, but also the law of the bush now triumphs... Bush rector Gerwel thumbles [trembles] with fear whenever he sees or hears them... He has firmly become a tool in their hands. Desmond is the King Kong: Whilst he denounces violence elsewhere he keeps his mouth shut when it comes to UWC. In spite of the fact that our campus has been transformed into a battlefield Tutu did not utter a word to denounce the stone throwing and other deeds of violence that occurred. King Kong must stop pointing his finger to others and start cleaning up his doorstep.

The acknowledgement of divisions and the withdrawal of the majority of students from SRC programmes only came at the beginning of 1989. Noby Ngombane, the SRC President in 1988/89, admitted that:

students experienced the previous SRC as aloof and uninvolved because they did not address students' immediate problems. Students [have] lost confidence in the SRC as an institution, *that is supposed to act on their behalf* (emphasis added).³⁹

The intervention came too late. Years of student organisation had been lost. Apathy had set in and weakened the SRC. In the SRC elections in 1990 only 17% of the electorate voted, 8% shy of the 25% required to legitimate the SRC.

Other factors which caused division and alienation among students related to the attempt at building a hegemonic project and the exercise of domination. As was indicated earlier, from 1987 the SRC jettisoned the non-partisan approach. It thereafter sought to assemble a non-racial front amongst the SRC affiliate structures, in order to undermine the 'consent' of the South African ruling class within the university. Acceptance of a non-racial policy was symbolised by the adoption of the Freedom Charter of 1955 as a beacon of struggle. This strategy was not only intended to achieve local political gains, but was also intended to have a bearing at the national level especially when many formations in the community and in the labour movement were, at the time, doing the same. As the document of the SRC asserted, the policy of non-racialism 'has been proved and tested to be correct in many decades of our common struggle against apartheid'.⁴⁰

Only six out of 60 bodies under the umbrella of the SRC adopted the policy of non-racialism.⁴¹ The passive response to the SRC's drive to get these structures to adopt the Freedom Charter was not because they necessarily rejected the principle of non-racialism. Actual reasons ranged from dormancy (eg some hostel committees), to indifference to politics (eg academic discipline, regional and sports bodies), to being explicitly apolitical (eg some religious societies). Most of them also did not attend constitutional meetings such as General Councils where political issues dominated. In response the SRC threatened to

withhold their budgetary allocations if these clubs and societies did not clarify their political orientations.⁴²

This leads us to the aspect of domination. As already stated, in the process of its development the SRC exercised domination over its perceived rivals and those which were within its framework. A trend towards this position emerged in 1986 after the rejection of Azasm's request to affiliate with the SRC, because, according to the SRC, 'in other universities where different ideologies existed, confrontation had been the only result'⁴³ and that of the RMC 'on the grounds that it should work through Azaso'.⁴⁴ In 1987, after Sansco took exclusive control of the SRC, the position was accentuated and made explicit. HAPCU and the SRC Labour Committee both SRC affiliates were forced to disband for allegedly being controlled by 'ultra-leftist, racial-capitalist and workerist supporters'.⁴⁵ The essence of the latter groups' tensions with the SRC were a microcosm of the 'ideological disputes' which raged through the 'Mass Democratic Movement' represented by the United Democratic Front (UDF). The key issues at the time, on the one hand, were whether the thesis of 'racial capitalism' or 'colonialism of a special type' should be used to describe the South African situation.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the issue was whether to accept the notion of an exclusively working class movement (dubbed 'workerism') or to accept the South African Communist Party as an existing class-based component of the Charterist movement (See Marx, 1992:197).

The nature of the disputes between the SRC and Black Consciousness-oriented groups such as Azasm and BSSP were not only ideological, but were also about the struggle for territorial control. These too were a microcosm of a larger political conflict between the supporters of the UDF and Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo) in the 1980s.⁴⁷ On campus, the SRC rejected Azasm and BSSP applications for affiliation because of their refusal to accept the policy of non-racialism.⁴⁸ It further indicted Azasm and BSSP of being 'racist' and of causing 'disunity and bitterness' amongst students.⁴⁹ The charges were refuted by Azasm and BSSP claiming they subscribed to the principle of 'anti-racism'.⁵⁰

The tensions culminated in the violent disruption of an Azasm and BSSP meeting called to defy the SRC ruling. Both the decision to refuse them permission to operate on campus and the subsequent disruption of their meeting were criticised by the majority of students (and some academics) on campus.⁵¹ However, what is relevant to our discussion here is that these events demonstrated that the SRC decisions and actions no longer enjoyed the support of students on whose behalf they were supposed to have been executed.

The Collapse and Rethink of the Functions of the SRC, 1990-1992

The UWC SRC entered the 1990s in a state of crisis. Two factors, discussed earlier, accounted for this predicament: first the neglect to focus on internal contradictions while simultaneously engaging in broader national issues; second, the politics of sectarianism and domination alienated a large number of students on campus leading to docility.

The crisis coincided with the advent of a changed political conjuncture as a result of FW de Klerk's announcement to unban previously outlawed political organisations, and the release of leading political prisoners in February 1990. De Klerk's surprise announcements precipitated the review of strategies by the liberation forces - with some of the latter opting for negotiation politics. The combination of these factors accentuated the SRC crisis culminating in its failure to obtain the required vote (25%) for legitimisation during the September 1990 SRC elections. Between 1990 and 1992 UWC students did not have an elected student government and had, over the same period, two Interim-SRC committees that oversaw students matters.

The years without an SRC were characterised, on the one hand, by apathy and political lull on the part of the general student body and, on the other, the commencement of a serious debate conducted among a few student activists and leaders of various student formations, including the Interim-SRC. Two positions seemed to dominate the debate: the one view was to try and carve a niche for the SRC in the changed national political terrain, and the other wanted to focus on building a strong student government controlled by and accountable to students. The latter position seems to have won as the Interim-SRC opted for the reintroduction of a non-partisan approach pursued between 1981 and 1986. Student organisations, such as Azasm and later the Pan Africanist Student Organisation (Paso), that were previously refused permission to register with the SRC, were now allowed to affiliate.⁵²

Decisions to be executed by the SRC were arrived at after open debate and discussion. This was evidenced by a successful student summit in October 1991, convened to draw-up a response to the university administration's proposals for upfront payment of tuition fees, the 48% tuition fee increase, the new food system at residences, the privatisation of the cafeteria, and the exclusion and admission policies.⁵³ In short this position once more suggested that the SRC would assume a trade union character that would lead collective struggles of students for an improvement of certain conditions that were not favourable to students.

However, students were still divided on the methods to use when demanding redress to their concerns. In the 1980s the excessive, and sometimes ill-timed,

use of the boycott method had over a period of time yielded negative consequences. On the other hand, there seemed to be a realisation that the boycott strategy was one of the various methods to employ, including negotiations with university authorities, to attain the desired objectives. The strategy of negotiations was particularly inappropriate to some students, who apparently feared that negotiations may drag for long, and that this might result in divisions among or sacrificing of some students. The negotiations method was unsuitable to some students because they were aware that the circumstances that led to financial exclusions varied, whereas they wanted the problem of exclusion to be, for reasons of expediency, approached unvaryingly.⁵⁴

In addition, they wanted to have a centralised coordination of the anti-exclusion campaign, especially when it became apparent that some students had decided to make individual arrangements with the university administration. According to the Interim-SRC out of 2 956 students affected, only 77 reported their cases to the Interim-SRC and 334 preferred to deal directly with the administration.⁵⁵

The indecision about whether or not to be flexible on the usage of different methods of struggle was explicitly demonstrated by the tensions between the charterist and non-charterist student groupings, which both had some of their members represented in SRC committee of 1991/92, and tensions within the charterist camp itself over, inter alia, how to manage the issue of upfront payment of tuition fees and exclusion of students. Initially, the Interim-SRC opted to enter into negotiations with the university authorities. However, after negotiations between the university administration and student representatives deadlocked, tensions among students resurfaced and culminated in a class boycott that began on March 24 and ended on April 2, 1992, when negotiations resumed. At another meeting held on April 29, to report on the progress of negotiations and to decide on other actions to be taken, the strains had worsened leading to the abrupt closure of the meeting.⁵⁶ In the midst of that confusion the Interim-SRC called a referendum to decide whether or not to resort to a boycott as a method of addressing students' concerns. Some of the students opposed to the idea of a referendum formed a group called the Committee for Democracy (Codemo) composed of individual members of Azasco, Paso, the newly formed Students-Intellectuals Socialist League (SISL), and some expelled members of Sasco. Nonetheless, the referendum went ahead, and an overwhelming majority (80%) of students (34% of the electorate) voted against the boycott.⁵⁷ But soon afterwards the Interim-SRC was forced to resign after Codemo tabled a vote of no confidence at a mass meeting held in August 1992. The reason for the vote of no confidence was based on the allegation that the Interim-SRC had sold-out on students grievances on exclusions.

For the next period of 12 months there was no functioning student government at UWC. During this period student concerns and attempts to resuscitate the SRC were managed by the office of the Campus Coordinator in conjunction with a Committee composed of students appointed to prepare for the next elections. In August 1993 this task group succeeded in conducting an SRC election which was won by the majority of students belonging to Codemo. It is still too early to comment on this new SRC.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to conceptualise and explain how the UWC SRC performed its roles and functions. It indicated that the SRC operated as a component of the liberation movement, and its strategies were intended to undermine the ideological basis which the university was originally established to maintain. This strategy was upheld even after the university had made a commitment to address the educational problems experienced by most students on the campus. The essay also argued that the weakness of absorbing student struggle into a centralised national project failed to take into account the need for students to simultaneously fight for strategic reforms on campus. In the long run this shortcoming contributed to the weakening of student government on campus. However, the idea of strategic reforms raises questions as to whether the change at the university could be completed without the transformation of the broader society from which the university originated? This matter is the subject of another essay.

Another objective of this paper was to analyse the ideological functions of the SRC. On the one hand, it aimed at building a hegemonic front with which to challenge the ruling class. On the other, it wished to exercise domination, particularly over those who did not comply with its ideological orientation. The evidence presented in this paper shows that this project was not successful, because of lack of support from the majority of students, and due to the excesses committed in pursuit of these objectives. This issue revealed one important lesson, which is that a university, by its very character, is a service organisation that brings together students (workers and academic staff) of different backgrounds and orientations. And as such it cannot be used to serve one particular ideological function. However, the achievement of a hegemonic project is possible so long as it comes as a result of the process of struggle and not merely by proclamation or diktat.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the history of the UWC SRC is a rich one and that the students played a crucial role in the struggle to end the system of racial and ethnic domination. Indeed, they succeeded in frustrating the state's intentions of forging a viable project of a society divided along racial and ethnic lines.

ENDNOTES

1. I would like to acknowledge useful criticisms and comments from my colleagues in the Department of Political Studies and students at the Marxist Theory Seminar series at UWC where the initial drafts of the paper were presented. I alone take full responsibility for errors and weaknesses that might still exist.
I also wish to bring to the attention of the reader that the author was during some of the years covered in this article active in student politics at UWC. The author has tried to be as objective as possible.
2. The concept of hegemony in the text follows Antonio Gramsci's usage in the context of fascist Italy (see Adamson, 1980:170).
3. See an internal document of Sanaco entitled 'Assessment of the State of Organisation At UWC', November 1987, and Nobby Ngombane, SRC President 1988/89, cited in *UWC 30 Years*, supplement to *Frontline* (Johannesburg), October 1989:18.
4. The 'disruption squad' originated during the 1985 solidarity class boycott. At the time, the outfit operated under the auspices of the Release Mandela Campaign (RMC) that was in conflict with the SRC committee of 1985. The latter was not keen in prolonging the class boycott which the RMC propagated. In 1985 the 'disruption squad' was made up of high school and some UWC students who were members of the RMC. However, from 1987 onwards the 'disruption squad' was closely associated with the SRC.
5. For a detailed account of the forms of bureaucratic controls at these universities, see Gwala, 1988.
6. N Morgan and J Hendricks, 'UWC - A Long Proud History of Struggle', *Quarterly Newsletter of the University of the Western Cape*, 1(4), December 1987.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Leaflet issued by the Rector, RE van der Ross, October 11, 1978.
9. *Ibid* (emphasis added).
10. See 'UWC Objectives', in *Calender 93: General Information*, Part I, University of the Western Cape.
11. This followed the acceptance of the constitution by the Student Body and endorsement by the Council of the University in August 1981.
12. See *Constitution of the Students' Representative Council*, University of the Western Cape, adopted in August 1981, p3.
13. *Ibid*, p19.
14. Interview with the 1983 SRC executive committee, in *Saspu National*, May 1983.
15. This assumption was confirmed by the 1983 SRC committee when asked if it had considered registering to a particular student organisation. The response was that affiliation to a particular organisation would have to be put to the student body to decide (see Interview with the 1983 SRC, in *Ibid*).
16. In his study on UWC student politics Charlton Koen claims that the 1987 'election results were changed so as to elect an SRC comprising of only Sanaco members' (see C Koen, 'The Present in the Light of the Past: Student Politics at UWC - 1986-92', paper presented at the 'Marxist Theory Seminar', at the University of the Western Cape, March 4, 1993:11). If this claim is correct, then it confirms the suspicion that Azaam had when their candidates lost in these elections, but decided not to lodge a protest, fearing that they might appear as bad losers and thus losing the ground they had gained. (The author was the UWC branch chairperson of Azaam at the time).
17. See *SRC Secretarial Report*, 1988/89.
18. In 1988 there were 60 clubs and societies affiliated to the SRC. They are categorised as regional organisations (5), ie formations of where students come from; sports bodies (22); religious societies (10); Hostel Committees (9); Discipline (Subject-oriented) bodies (12); and Student (political) organisations (2), including the Namibia National Student Organisation (Nanso) (source: *UWC Calender: General Information*, 1988).
19. See *Constitution of the Students' Representative Council*, University of the Western Cape, adopted in August 1981, p19.
20. *Loc cit.*

21. See interview with the 1983 SRC committee, in *Saspu National*, May 1983. The 'non-collaborationist' position was upheld by New Unity Movement-aligned students even in the late-1980s. They never even organised public meetings on campus or participated in SRC elections.
22. Koen, *op cit*, 1993:3.
23. See article by the Jonathan De Vries, Vice-President of the UWC SRC, *The Cape Times*, February 2, 1983.
24. See interview with Joe Phaahla and Kate Philip, 'Student Movement Today', in *Beyond Reform: The Challenge of Change*, (Speeches Presented at the Nusas July Festival, University of Cape, July 1983).
25. For example, workers' support of boycotts against high rent and bus tariffs had a direct link with their struggle for better remuneration scales at the workplace.
26. See *The Cape Times*, May 8, 1982.
27. See *Cape Herald*, June 2, 1984.
28. The 1986 solidarity boycott was one of the saddest decisions carried out by the SRC. The 'solidarity' was that a total of 6772 students registered with the university could not write exams while the six students were helping with relief and aid. This was in spite of the arrangements made by the administration to allow these students to sit for a special examination after the winter vacation.
29. Jimmy Albertus, in the correspondence section of the *Bulletin*, May 2, 1988.
30. See 'From Ivory Towers to a Peoples University', pamphlet issued by the Democratic Student Front, undated. The SRC was part of the DSF.
31. For an illuminating review of this subject, see Bundy, 1989.
32. See Laclau, 1979:81-142. Laclau described two levels at which class struggles take place: at the level of modes of production and the at the level of political and ideological superstructures. He further pointed out that at the ideological level, class struggles are not articulated by classes as such but by the people, who may also involve students.
33. See *SRC News*, a leaflet issued in 1987. The point I am making is not that the SRC had no right to challenge the presence of racist lecturers on campus. On the contrary it had to. But, the intentions of getting rid of such lecturers is what I am concerned with. The actions were not, in my opinion, fundamentally intended to create a critical environment in the lecture and seminar rooms where racist and reactionary ideas could be stifled. They were intended to push 'the struggle to final victory'.
There is an interesting point about one of the accused lecturers namely Professor George Delpierre, Head of the Chemistry Department, indicted of 'working for the police and carrying a gun on campus' and subsequently suspended by the university pending the sifting of the Disciplinary Committee. Professor Delpierre was among the five Professors accused in 1979 of being 'involved in a plot to oust the university's rector', Professor R van der Ross, and replace him with a white [rector]. Later in the same year, the same Professors were the found 'guilty of reprehensible conduct... harming race relations on campus and causing tension between staff and students' (See *SRC UPDate*, volume 1, November 1987, and Gordon, (1980: 552).
34. I am grateful to Professor Colin Bundy for bringing this point to my attention.
35. See 'From Ivory Towers to a People's Education', a leaflet of DSF, undated.
36. See interview with Professor Jakes Gerwel in *UWC 30 Years*, supplement of *Frontline* (Johannesburg), October 1989, p9.
37. See a Sansco internal document entitled 'Assessment of the State of Organisation at UWC', November 1989. Quoted verbatim.
38. Before the construction of new residences there were 555 students living on campus. With the new residences built, an additional 1200 resided, making a total of 1755 students who lived on campus. These figures exclude a large number of students who resided illegally with friends as squatters.
39. Noby Ngombane, *UWC 30 Years*, Supplement to *Frontline*, October, 1989, p18.
40. See *UWC SRC Policy document*, adopted in September 1987.

41. These were Sansco, Student Union for Christian Action (Suca), Catholic Student Association (Casa), Young Christian Students (YCS), Anglican Student Society (Ansooc), and the University of the Western Cape Cricket Club. (Sources: *SRC Update*, Volume 1, March 1987. *Bulletin*, August 26, 1988).
42. See *SRC Update*, April 3-11, 1989.
43. Letter in response to Azam's application, dated 28 April and signed by Phoebe Potgieter. Also see *Student Bulletin*, Western Cape, 1(2), May 1986, where the letter is cited.
44. See a Sansco internal document entitled 'Assessment of the State of Organisation at UWC', November 1989.
45. See *SRC News*, 1(2), September 1991.
46. See K Cullinan, 'Youth Politics: Dispelling the Myths', in *Work In Progress*, 90, July/August 1993, p22.
47. This subject has not been adequately covered in the existing literature. However, important beginnings have made in some journalistic literature. See for example: Lodge and Nasson (eds), 1991; Malan, 1990; Mathiane, 1989.
48. Letter addressed to Azam and BSSP, signed by Thandile Gubevu, General-Secretary of the SRC, 15 May 1987.
49. Ibid, and interview with Noby Ngombane, in *UWC 30 Years*, p18.
50. See a full text of Azam and BSSP response to these charges in *Open letter to the SRC*, (cc the Rector and Staff Association), 23 May 1987.
51. See *The Cape Times*, May 23, 1987; *South*, June 2, 1987; and *Bulletin*, June 3, 1987.
52. See *The Cape Times*, October 12, 1990. In retrospect the SRC ban on Azam had provided the latter organisation with a lot and quicker publicity which they would probably not have procured through conventional ways of organising.
53. See *Student Voice*, 1(3), October 1991.
54. For example, the Interim-SRC in tandem with Administration identified four categories of students who could not register because of outstanding fees: (a) 1256 students promoted to the next level of study; (b) 319 students who had completed the degree or diploma; (c) 699 students not promoted to the next level of study; (d) 702 students also excluded on academic grounds. All these students owed the university a total of R9.6 million. (Source: *Bulletin*, 4(9), March-April 3, 1992)
55. Pamphlet issued by the SRC, March 1992.
56. The SRC was accused of having (unsubstantiated) 'bureaucratic tendencies', of being undemocratic, and cutting 'secret deals' with the administration on the issue of upfront payment of tuition fees and exclusion of students, hence it did not want another class boycott. (Interviews with Lindokuhle Dlamini, UWC Branch Chairperson of Paso; Saliem Patel and Yolisa Pikiie, members of Codemo, all conducted April 22, 1993). So far, I have not found clear evidence that supported these accusations.
57. The referendum was monitored by a committee composed of organisations such as the PAC, ANC, AZAPO, COSATU, NACTU, NEHAWU, UWC, NADEL, and Community Law Centre - UWC. The presence of this organisation during the referendum explains why the outcome of the referendum was acceptable to the student body that was starkly divided.

REFERENCES

- Adanson, WL (1988) - *Hegemony and Revolutions: a study of Antonio Gramsci's political and cultural theory* (London and Los Angeles: University of California Press).
- Alexander, N (1990) - *Education and the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa, Essays and Speeches* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers).
- Bundy, C (1989) - 'Around Which Corner? Revolutionary Theory and Contemporary South Africa', *Transformation*, 8.
- Giddens, A (1987) - *The Nation-State and Violence: Volume Two of A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press).
- Fine, A and E Webster (1989) - 'Transcending Traditions: trade unions and political unity', in *South African Review* 5 (Johannesburg: Ravan Press).
- Fine, R (1992) - 'Civil society theory and the politics of transition in South Africa', in *Searchlight South Africa*, 3(1).

- Gordon, L (ed) (1979) - *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations).
- Gwala, N (1988) - 'State control, student politics and the crisis in black universities', in W. Cobbett and R Cohen (eds) - *Popular Struggles in South Africa* (London: James Currey).
- Laclau, E (1979) - *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books).
- Lodge, T and B Nasson (eds) - (1991) - *All, Here and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s* (Cape Town: David Philip).
- Malan, R (1990) - *My Traitors Heart: a South African exile returns to face his country, his tribe, and his conscience* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press).
- Marx, A (1992) - *Lessons of Struggle: South African internal opposition, 1960-1990* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press).
- Mathiane, N (1989) - *South Africa: the diary of troubled times* (New York: Freedom House).