

People's Education: Creating a Democratic Future

Thron Rensburg is national secretary of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC). INGRID OBERY interviewed him on the present education crisis and the NECC's people's education programme.

What are the origins of the NECC?

The Soweto Parents Crisis Committee was founded in October 1985 in response to the schools crisis in Soweto and the West Rand. The SPCC convened the first national education crisis conference in December at Wits, which 160 concerned groups attended. They felt the SPCC's approach was correct, and that its officials should form the basis of a NECC, together with representatives from 11 regions. This met for the first time in March, just before the second national conference in Durban, but only after it did the national structure really begin to operate. On 8 April an executive of three was elected: Vusi Khanyile and Rev Molefe Tsele, both based in Johannesburg, as national chairperson and national treasurer respectively, and myself, based in Port Elizabeth, as national secretary.

Last year the students' slogan was 'Liberation now, education later'. At the December conference this was changed to 'People's education for people's power'. Why did this happen and what does it mean - and what exactly is meant by people's education?

Pupils can only organise and become a force for change to combine with other such forces if they are at school. Workers cannot develop working-class consciousness or power if they are not in the factories to organise together. Student structures were increasingly weakened by almost two years of stayaway, and a general breakdown in discipline.

In demanding people's education for people's power in people's schools, we aim to shift the balance of educational

power, beginning by establishing a people's authority alongside the existing state authority. The Crisis in Education Committees (CECs) and eventually the Parent-Teacher Student Associations (PTSAs) will lay the foundations for future education structures. In some cases they have already taken on local education responsibilities.

The People's Education Secretariat, consisting of five people appointed at the April NECC meeting in Johannesburg, will set up offices in their regions to gather information and contributions from all interested organisations. The secretariat will compile and present its findings to our next national conference in Port Elizabeth at the end of June.

Its suggestions will include alternative programmes, courses and material to be used in schools. This content will emerge as interested organisations and the various crisis committees look critically at Bantu Education, considering each subject taught to identify what should be scrapped or replaced. History, for example, will certainly not be an exam subject next year: we have recommended to regions that they discuss this. We will formulate our own history syllabus, which will include people's perceptions of what history is, international and African history.

The secretariat will also consider the applications of science subjects, and also look critically at the language question. For example, it will consider introducing 'people's set-work books'. These books, for instance a new poetry book, will be chosen or compiled by people involved in implementing people's education. This process will not be completed overnight, and it will be

constantly changing and dynamic. The next two months will give us the embryo, but real people's education is a process rather than a rigid written doctrine.

Who are the people who make up the secretariat? What experience have they in education or as educationists? Do they have links to progressive teachers' organisations?

The secretariat convenor is Zwelakhe Sisulu, the editor of New Nation, who has been interested and concerned with the educational struggle. We define an educationist as a person concerned with and involved in the issues of the education struggle, because education is located within the broader society, not apart from it. Other members of the Secretariat are the Rev Stofile, a theology lecturer from Fort Hare, Pravin Gordhan, who is involved in the Natal Indian Congress, Fr Albert Nolan and Fr Ssangaliso Mkhathshwa, general secretary of the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference. These convenors will employ a full-time person to run the regional office, consult with all progressive teachers' organisations, and gather information. The employees should be activists with experience in the educational struggle since 1976, in education crisis committees, PTSAs or student bodies like COSAS, able to consult with a wide spectrum of people and organisations and acceptable to most groups.

Delegates to the December education conference at Wits represented 160 organisations of many different kinds. Delegates to the March NECC conference were regional representatives from parent, student and teacher organisations. Why the change in the nature of representation, and was it successful?

We wanted representatives from organisations specifically engaged in the education struggle. The NECC is a specialised educational organisation of the people, the embryo of a future education structure in a people's republic. We envisage similar specialisation in the civic movement and in other areas of organisation.

The idea of regional delegations was to get as large a spread of representatives as possible. Delegates represented crisis committees from the

regions: Western Cape, Southern Cape, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, Border, OFS, Natal, and North, South, Eastern and Western Transvaal. Crisis committees are the basic local structure the NECC is working with at the moment.

In Port Elizabeth, for instance, the CEC consists of 28 organisations, including the nine COSATU-affiliated unions, the local community, women's and youth organisations, PEBCO, PEWO, PEYCO, and the Port Elizabeth Student Council (PESCO). They elected a 'committee of ten' which forms the working CEC. The Eastern Cape region as a whole includes about 30 towns: 120 representatives from 20 of these towns attended the national conference. In the Eastern Cape, too, an ad hoc committee of five represents and co-ordinates the whole region. These structures will soon be formalised; the NECC is drafting a constitution for CECs locally and regionally.

Reportedly a number of students were not happy about the NECC decision to return to school, and school attendance in some areas is still very low.

At the April NECC meeting in Johannesburg we were told that in some areas CECs were unable to report back to the mass of students, to explain this shift in strategy and direction and why they must return to school. The state banned meetings in a number of areas, and this is one reason for the misunderstanding.

Many students expected a major decision along the lines of an immediate national rent boycott, or a massive worker stayaway. The NECC of course could not call for these things since it is an educational committee. We would have to consult extensively with civic bodies if we wanted to initiate a rent boycott, and they would have to get mandates from their constituencies. Similarly with trade unions and a stayaway.

I think the CECs did not realise they had not prepared students sufficiently for what might come out of the conference. This also reflects a problem common to many areas - lack of understanding between students' organisations and parents. At the conference this was reflected in the huge parent representation which outweighed that of students: a definite imbalance we must work to redress.

A problem is that we do not yet have a

formalised structure for the CECs at local level. In some areas individuals are appointed rather than elected organisational representatives. The question then arises as to whom they are answerable, to what extent they are aware of student problems or feelings, and whether they are in daily contact with students and their organisations.

Once PTSA's are set up in all higher primary and high schools, we can look forward to building co-operative relations between PTSA's and other local organisations, such as street and worker committees, to ultimately form some sort of town structure. This of course raises questions of the transitional state and the concept of dual power is crucial to achieving this.

It has been argued that NECC should co-operate and organise with as broad a range of educational organisations as possible. To this end it has formed an alliance with the African Teachers Association of South Africa (ATASA). ATASA is regarded by many, particularly teachers in the National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA) and other progressive teacher organisations, as conservative and often reactionary. Its president and secretary have held their positions for over 20 years. Can you comment on the relationship between ATASA and the NECC, and general NECC policy regarding relations with teachers' representative bodies.

We recognised ATASA as the major representative of teachers in South Africa, with 54 000 members nationally. It was the only existing body for African teachers until the progressive organisations came along. It could make deals with the state because it served on state structures. ATASA is made up of regional teachers' organisations like the Transvaal African Teachers Union and also town structures.

I am not clear on its elective procedure, but it is quite possible that the president and secretary have held their positions for years. Traditionally there is not much connection between ATASA membership and its leadership and I think this is unlikely to change very much.

Members of ATASA who are school inspectors or have other jobs implementing DET policy have not stopped what they are doing. They will come under great pressure to give up their

jobs. For example in Port Elizabeth, a Mr KB Thabata, a deputy director of the DET, evoked the ire of both people and students by denouncing the local PTCC, and actively working against it. His house was petrol-bombed a while ago.

Our opinion at the March conference was that it would be tactically important to recognise ATASA.

Progressive teachers organisations objected and put forward a motion rejecting ATASA. The conference instead passed a resolution condemning teachers' organisations or their members who victimised teachers involved in progressive organisations - a problem particularly in the Western Cape, where some teachers were expelled.

Reading between the lines, clearly ATASA is expected to respond by moving in a progressive direction. It has already withdrawn from certain government bodies on which it served until the time of the conference.

After the conference, students in Uitenhage gave ATASA members a one week ultimatum to resign and become NEUSA members. A similar situation occurred in Port Elizabeth and the crisis committees in both areas managed to neutralise the situation. The conference took a resolution condemning Inkatha. If ATASA members in Natal remain linked to Inkatha, the next conference will take action against them.

The NECC does not believe teachers should be forced to align with any specific teachers' organisation. But increasingly ATASA members are incurring the wrath of the people and they will have to move. We are waiting for democratic teachers' organisations to come to the fore; there is space for them to organise and recruit from ATASA membership.

Other teachers' organisations represented on the NECC include the Western Cape Teachers Union, the Democratic Teachers Association (Western Cape), and the Eastern Cape Teachers Union. In the Western Cape these organisations appear to work together. I do not think there is any alliance of organisations in the Eastern Cape although both NEUSA and Eastern Cape Teachers Union are members of the CEC and thus in touch with one another.

What role will teachers' organisations play in implementing people's education? Does the NECC have a policy for inclusion of white, coloured and Indian

teachers' organisations, and will the people's education programme apply to such schools?

Teachers, not activists, will be most important in implementing people's education. And we will have to rely particularly on teachers currently involved in democratic teachers' organisations, as the most effective people to implement people's education.

demanding people's education immediately. They want to know why teachers still provide gutter education. Pupils constantly pressurise teachers, and organisations like ATASA will have to shift fast if they are to provide education acceptable to students.

As regards other race groups: this is a serious problem. Clearly we cannot implement a new education system without support from all groups, and we have



NECC conference - Demanding people's education for people's power

We will liaise with their organisations nationally, and provide them with our programmes and suggestions for them to expand on and implement. Teachers will be the cadres of people's education.

In a number of schools since the March conference pupils refused tuition and

been looking at ways to move into these schools. We have talked, for example, to the National Union of South African Students, which contacted a number of white schools in its education charter campaign.

We will begin by moving through these sorts of channels, and of course through

progressive white teachers. The 'white bloc' has until now been impenetrable, but I don't think this is the case anymore.

We have serious problems in coloured and Indian areas where there is often little adult political organisation. In Port Elizabeth for example pupils in Indian and coloured areas are still struggling to resolve the prefect versus SRC issue. We have urged all our CECs to address this problem, and to incorporate representatives from all townships, not just the African ones.

This is crucial since people's education is not a blueprint for African schools alone. Individuals in some coloured and Indian areas are in touch with NECC structures, but we have no formalised links as yet - except in the Western Cape, where coloured schools are very involved in the NECC. But that region is divided, with one CEC based in the coloured community and another in the African community. This is not an ideological but a geographical divide, which we are trying to resolve.

What regional differences are there in the NECC's organisation and mobilisation?

The Eastern Cape is the most organised, and has a rudimentary regional structure. We are still battling to set up regional structures in other areas, although recently, on 10 May, the Transvaal region held its first regional conference. In Natal we have serious problems from violent attacks by Inkatha on members of student representative councils: Lamontville for instance is still in a state of seige, with one SRC member killed and a number in hiding.

What role did trade unions play in the NECC, and to what extent will they be involved in formulating and implementing people's education?

We had full delegations from both COSATU and CUSA at the March conference. They participated fully, especially on the issues of the May Day stayaway and the 16-18 June stayaway, for which they gave us the go-ahead. But we do not foresee a specific role for workers' organisations in implementing people's education. They will make an input at local, town and regional levels where they form part of the NECC's grassroots structure.

What about organisations and student bodies linked to National Forum?

There is no special provision to include or exclude any group. What determines participation in the NECC is the situation on the ground in the various areas. Which organisations sit on local committees will be determined at regional level. Nationally we welcome and expect involvement from all those concerned and committed to revolutionary change and the establishment of a democratic education system.

What particular organisational problems are there in bantustan schools, and does the NECC have a strategy for these areas?

At this stage we have no structures in 'homeland' areas. The three main areas where we face many problems and repression from so-called homeland authorities are Kwazulu, more recently Lebowa, and the Ciskei. The Ciskei has consistently attacked COSAS since 1983. But 'homelands' are part of the future agenda. In 'South Africa proper' our target group for organisation is about 5,3-million pupils in African schools, and there are a further two million in 'homeland' areas.

What are the different organisational issues in small and large towns?

It is easier to organise in small towns because there are fewer schools. For example in Port Alfred or Alexandria in the Eastern Cape there are four or five schools. Two are lower primary which leaves about three higher primary and senior secondary schools, which are the major organisational targets.

But on the other hand state repression tends to be more vicious in small towns. Leadership is more easily identifiable and suffers constant harassment. For example in Lebowa, some people were killed by the A-team vigilante group which operates there and an A-team is also active in Lamontville.

UDF regional structures are important in rural areas and small towns, where we often share the same structures. Often a UDF town structure will consist of the same organisations as the Parents' Crisis Committee.

In bigger towns the number of schools is dramatically greater. In Soweto, for example, there are more than 60 high and

higher primary schools, and PTSAs have to be organised in each one. In Port Elizabeth there are 22 higher primary and 11 high schools, where SRCs have to be organised. But it is easier to organise in bigger towns, although there is harassment, and students are generally more politicised, and tend to emulate adult organisational structures, meetings and procedures.

Another problem is school buildings. In Port Elizabeth four schools have been totally destroyed, and 40% of the rest affected by burnings. So there is massive overcrowding. In Port Elizabeth 30% of schools have morning and afternoon teaching shifts, with overloaded teacher-pupil ratios, often with between 60 to 130 pupils per teacher. And where two different groups of pupils are taught in shifts, both groups' school day is shortened from seven to four hours.

This will inevitably lead to a massive failure rate, which forms part of state strategy. The DET in Port Elizabeth refused to budge an inch with regard to fixing existing and constructing new buildings although we made many representations to them about it. In Duncan Village they did do something, but involved the community council, so the community rejected the project. The community councils are in fact inoperative, while the CEC is regarded as the only legitimate committee by the community. The DET recognised this and now faces a dilemma: whether or not to involve the CEC in rebuilding schools.

The Port Elizabeth CEC made it clear that unless DET moves, it will build schools itself - people's schools totally outside the jurisdiction of the DET.

Is it really a dilemma, or is the state planning a mass failure? It is in an economic bind; it cannot create jobs and cannot afford to have masses of

African matriculants demanding them. The state also has no clear idea of where Bantu Education is going and what to do about it. It argues that activists take advantage of the situation to 'foment unrest'; it cannot be seen to be weak and give in to democratic demands.

There have been occasional reports of an ongoing Education Charter campaign, and also a Transvaal Student Congress million signature campaign to unban COSAS. What has happened to these campaigns?

The Education Charter campaign is continuing, and will combine with our People's Education Secretariat. The activists running the Charter campaign have skills crucial to our education campaign, and would be useful in running the secretariat regional offices.

The March conference decided not to go for the million signature campaign. We did however decide to 'unban' COSAS ourselves. On 16 June we will go on a massive campaign. Students countrywide will wear their COSAS T-shirts in open defiance of the state. So students will re-appropriate COSAS for themselves.

What developments do you anticipate in the education crisis this year?

The NECC is committed to the policy that this is a school year - pupils must go to school. Black schooling is in a deep crisis. Teachers indicated to us that if students did not have setbooks by the end of March they would be unable to complete syllabi in time for exams. But we will still push for a school year. 16-18 June will of course be critical, and we cannot predict the state's response to activities then. State response may also be a deciding factor as to whether students will insist on continued boycott.