

Durban in Elgin?

The Nusas planning seminar, December 1973

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By December 1973, Nusas and the student left had defined its core around the radical politics of opposition. Questions about whether students on the Nusas campuses should be involved in anti-apartheid politics had been replaced by issues of pro-active political strategy, rather than defensive reactions to state and government actions.

Nusas had weathered storms and faced daunting challenges: the rise of black consciousness and separatism; a growing distancing from its traditional liberal base on campus and in the broader community of anti-apartheid opposition; banning of senior office bearers and officials; the Schelbusch/Le Grange parliamentary commission of enquiry into Nusas and three other organisations; near bankruptcy and organisational collapse prior to the restructuring of 1970 and 1971. It had emerged revitalized, more focused in its radicalism and commitment, and increasingly proactive and strategic in its activities, especially through growing involvement in worker organization off-campus, and political campaigning and on-campus education.

The 'Durban Moment' represented a questioning and examination of 'everything that existed'. It involved intellectual, organisational, strategic, and 'lived' challenges to terrains as diverse as culture and lifestyle, politics and identity, analysis and social theory, socialist and liberal thought and practice, and black consciousness and white identity.

One of the defining characteristics of this 'moment' was the way in which it was reflected in so many different facets of existence and activity. Intellectually and politically, there was a flowering of ideas and practices which initially found its

strongest expression in and around the city of Durban, and through individuals living, working and studying there.

Nusas leadership, both nationally and on some of the affiliated campuses, were immersed in this 'radical critique of everything that existed'. This 'radicalism' began to take more tangible and strategic form at the Nusas December seminar held on a farm near Elgin in 1973. It was here that the influences of the 'Durban moment' were synthesized into a plan for coherent student activism.

The seminar was attended by Nusas executive members, presidents of the affiliated SRCs, chairs of Nusas local committees, and a delegation from each campus selected by the affiliated SRC. The gathering was premised on a growing realization that strategies of opposition had to be based on more than a broad opposition to apartheid. The sort of society being fought for was now a long-term factor in goals and strategies, and influenced the type of activity students would engage in.

Groups within Nusas and the student left had started exploring the history of opposition to segregation and apartheid, including the banned national liberation movements and earlier trade union organizations; and positioning themselves in relation to existing opposition organizations, including parliamentary, liberal and extra-parliamentary groups, and banned national liberation organisations functioning largely in exile.

This paper sets out the sorts of questions left-wing students and intellectuals on the Nusas campuses were grappling with as they defined their changing roles in social and political opposition. Responses to the black consciousness critique of white involvement in opposition initiatives, linked to an assessment of liberal thought, strategies and tactics, were at the heart of questions posed in a set of input and position papers which were strongly influenced by the thinking associated with the 'Durban moment'.

The paper narrates the 'story' of this gathering; records the key elements of the 'input' papers delivered by Geoff Budlender, Eddie Webster, Karel Tip and Charles Nupen; and explains how the 'outcomes' of the seminar formed the basis of student political campaigning in Johannesburg during 1974, including the focus on the history of opposition, and the campaign for release of all political prisoners.

In confronting these complex issues, seminar participants identified the central analytical and strategic issues facing the student left as it moved into 1974: radical responses to black consciousness; white student involvement in worker organisation; the inadequacies of traditional liberal opposition and response; the roles and strategies of political campaigns; the relationships between race and class interests. This reflected a key moment in the radicalisation of Nusas and the 'new' student left.