Intimidation and mindless thuggery

It has not been a pleasant time at UCT. One has felt both anger and sadness at the sight of a great old institution being wrecked by violence, intimidation and mindless thuggery. The mood of the mobs that rampaged across the campus, disrupting lectures, erecting barricades and damaging cars and other property was frightening to behold.

Why, one asks oneself, did it have to happen? Was it because Home Secretary of the new Labour government? Was it the TGWU trying to demonstrate its toughness, thereby keeping out a rival union that is said to be gaining ground in other educational institutions in the Western Cape? Why, in fact, after about six years of relatively smooth wage-bargaining with the workers did this round go so horribly sour?

As is usual of these occasions UCT is getting a thoroughly bad press. Cape Town’s English-language newspapers have been full of irate letters from students, former students and ordinary citizens accusing the University authorities of spinelessness.

The Argus of 1 October, for example, contains a letter from ‘Cleansing Broom’, expressing shame at his old University and announcing that he has cut UCT out of his will. Another letter from ‘Livid’ thanks the University for the excellent education he received but says that he declines to respond to its appeal for donations.

According to Mr Harold Harvey of The TGWU UCT treats its workers ‘like animals and children’. Even a casual visitor to the campus would recognise this statement as absurd. The Vice Chancellor, Dr Stuart Saunders, has claimed that the University’s offer compares very favourably with wage-scales in other universities, many of which pay less than half of what UCT has been offering. Even the Union was forced to acknowledge that this was true.

UCT’s workers are in fact, very well-treated indeed. The only category of employee in the University which is genuinely exploited are temporary lecturing staff, especially if they are female.

UCT’s workers, on the other hand, are truly part of the ‘labour aristocracy’, an old Marxist term used to describe an especially advantaged category of workers. UCT’s situation, at least in this respect is a microcosm of a far wider, national situation: in the short-run the labour aristocracy appears to get its way; regular wage increases are granted with no consideration for incidental matters such as increased productivity. Wage-runs ripple through the entire economy with profound inflationary effects.

But it is not simply the inflationary effects, it is also the effect on employment that is at issue. The better paid the labour aristocracy the fewer workers will be employed — and the more firms will be inclined to mechanise because machines don’t go on strike. With a national unemployment figure of perhaps 35 per cent this is tragic. Efforts to impose a national minimum wage (as some in the ANC would like to do) could actually bankrupt the country.

Efforts have been made to portray the UCT strike as merely an industrial relations dispute. That is undoubtedly so, but there are complications in the UCT situation.

Unlike industrial or commercial firms, the campus contains another highly volatile component in the form of the students. The radical students, a small but highly active and vociferous minority, will almost naturally side with the workers.

On this occasion, however, the overwhelming majority of students opposed the disruptions: probably no more than 50 to 60 participated in the forcible break-up of lectures or the erection of barricades. The newly-elected SRC, with its first black president, was paralysed by ambivalence, although it unequivocally...
Any colour, as long as it's white . . . .

- JO STIELAU

THE TIDE which toppled the Berlin Wall, the Soviet Communist Party and the gates of Victor Verster Prison dribbled ignominiously into our staff room last term in the shape of Model B.

Originally, Model B was touted as "letting blacks in" but the secret at the parental polls was that a "Yes" vote was the only way of keeping Them out. The reasoning behind this was that when they "took over", our schools would be safely "open" to all races and "closed" in terms of our admission policy. To tarry in admitting blacks would be to have Them force it upon us. Our schools would be nationalised along with our homes and cars if we weren't covered by flexi-plan B. So Model B's admission policy was debated between scones ("thanks to the Home Economics ladies") upon the wicker chairs which snag our tights. The lunatic left, easily identified by ethnic bracelets, herb teas and home-spun knitting in progress, led the floor with the usual niceties: Pupil Potential, Affirmative Action and Avoiding Discrimination. The Principal thanked them for their observations. The raving right were more interesting, if no less predictable, with a call for hair tests (not the pencil this time) for lice, blood tests for AIDS, financial checks and an affidavit to the effect that the pupil would not cause political unrest, boycott classes, denounce the prefect system, insist on using difficult-to-pronounce names or smell offensive in class. The Principal thanked them for their observations. The Principal herself observed that Standards and Traditions should be upheld at all costs — including the cost of blazers, ties, seasonal sports equipment and decent swimming attire. Discussion was opened to the floor and among the fears voiced were the problems of black taxis misbehaving in the school parking lot, militant Muslims demanding separate toilets under our Christian roof and black boys loitering after black girls at the front gate. Somebody suggested that these boys might loiter after God forbid, white girls — there followed an appalled silence . . . You can have Model B, like Ford's Model T, in any colour as long as you're white. However, the doors of learning are also open if you are pretty rich, speak good English, play reasonable hockey and tennis, have own transport, are free from AIDS and lice, are prepared under oath to retain your Hymen Intacta.

And . . . oh, by the way, WELCOME to our school!