

THE SOLOMON MAHLENGU FREEDOM COLLEGE

" . . . the school is not merely a school, it is a project."

*Text of address by Harold Wolpe to
the Third Annual African Activist
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The topic I want to speak about is the Solomon Mahlengu Freedom College established in Tanzania at a place called Morogoro some hundreds of miles from Dar es Salaam. What I want to do is make some brief remarks about the context in which the school came to be established and then talk a little bit about the kind of progress that has been made in some of the problems in developing the school.

Soweto of course is the moment in South African history which has quite correctly attracted our attention for the past five years. But in a sense Soweto was the outcome of a protracted struggle by the young people in the schools in South Africa which had gone on for many months before her. It was a nationwide struggle which was opposed to the futility of Bantu education, the condition of Bantu education, and the contents of the subjects which were being offered to the students. Of course, the crystalizing moment was the struggle over the medium of instruction, but that was simply the tip of a struggle which had been conducted by these young people over a very long period.

Now that struggle was a deeply politicizing struggle as much as and indeed the necessary forerunner to Soweto itself because it is quite clear that the strikes, the burning down of schools, the refusal to eat food, the protest against teaching the sittings, and the occupations that occurred over this previous period were the activities which gave the students not only a political consciousness but also a political knowledge of how to conduct struggles which found their expression in Soweto. Now, one of the continuing manifestations of that political consciousness in that politicization has been the continuous outflow of young people, particularly from the Transvaal and Soweto, but also from other parts of South Africa, an exodus out of South Africa into, for example, Swaziland, Botswana as staging grounds, and then further north. The very act of migrations by these people should be understood in its political sense because these are people varying in ages from perhaps 12, 13, 14 to early 20s breaking out of their families and taking dramatic acts of extricating themselves from the contexts in which they have lived with their families in South Africa.

Now that exodus also represents a political content in the sense that it is first of all a rejection of Bantu education

and apartheid. It is obviously a rejection of all those qualities of Bantu education which these people were struggling against before, during, and since Soweto. It goes further than that because in a limited, general sense it is also an expression of a position on national liberation. That is to say it is not simply a rejection of apartheid in a negative sense. It is also an intention to become involved somehow, whether it is through the armed struggle or whether through a reeducation in the work for a new South Africa. I am saying in a limited sense because of the important gaps in the education of many of these young people who began to become politicized in the late 1970s or mid-1970s is that they had actually very little knowledge of the history of the liberation movement in South Africa. The outlawing of the ANC and the other organisations has actually denied many of them of the opportunity of learning about the actions, struggles, and the problems the ANC faced in the period in particular since the second World War. And so while they have been involved in a basic kind of politicization, many of these younger people need much more in terms of knowledge, training, and understanding of the nature of the South African struggle.

Now a lot of these people have come out and gravitated to the ANC, not all of them, but many of them have gravitated towards the ANC and some of them, the numbers are unknown to me, have been directed towards political activities and others have been dealt with in terms of education. But this outpouring of young people actually led to a new situation for the ANC. Why? Because although the ANC has now for many years distributed young people who have come out into various educational institutions in both the socialist countries and in some western European countries as well as African countries in the past, that has actually been a small trickle of people, relatively speaking. And what Soweto did was to turn that trickle into an avalanche presenting the ANC with a real problem and a real issue about where to send them, what kind of education they were to receive.

Now I think that was coupled with a perhaps even more important factor than mere numbers, and that is the kinds of demands which were being expressed by both the students themselves and indeed also their parents. It was the views expressed by the exiles as well as the people left behind that there was a duty on the ANC to provide a contrast to Bantu education, that it was a point of political program and political policy for the ANC to take seriously and to provide for these young people an appropriate education which stands as against Bantu education.

In 1977 the Tanzanian government made available a large tract of land near this town called Morogoro precisely for a school for the ANC. And it was at that point that the ANC had to confront the problem directly: What is entailed in setting up a school? Apart from the material problem, sort of logistical

problem, of building, teachers, and so on, there was a very fundamental difficulty facing the ANC because, except a brief reference in the Freedom Charter, the ANC had not really confronted the question of education. What kind of educational policy, both for the present and the future, should a national liberation movement develop? And interestingly enough, during the first educational council meeting which was convened by the ANC in Tanzania in early 1978, there were a number of conceptions which dictated the thinking of those of us who were present in that meeting--conceptions of education which reflected our own training, whether in Bantu education, because a number of the Africans present had been trained in a Bantu education, the rest of us trained in conventional Western education, found ourselves accepting various conceptions as something natural, God-given. For example, the notion that education was a field which belongs to teachers as technicians, as experts. Associated with this was the notion of a passive role by students who were simply there to receive the truth to be handed to them by the expert teachers. The notion of authority relations, that teachers are there not only to hand down truth but also that people are there to obey the commands and the demands of teachers both in the classroom and in the school as a whole. These and a lot of other conceptions which were deeply embedded in the thinking of most of us were also very implicit and not at all explicit. For example, one of the issues which arose was the way in which students and teachers were going to be housed and the immediate planning of the physical nature of the school; put teachers in their master's house in a compound there and the students in dormitories 8 to a room. It was actually in the process of discussions with all of us correcting one another and teasing out the kinds of "normal" conceptions, authority relations or elitism that we began to uncover how these conceptions were inherent not only in the way we set up our authority structure but also the very physical planning of the school.

It was a very interesting meeting because it lasted something like three or four days, meeting from 9:00 in the morning to 1 at night, trying to thrash through many of these issues and of course by no means totally resolving them. But we did do two things: first of all, we established, and unfortunately I don't have a copy with me, a general policy statement of the ANC on education. There are three points that I want to mention which are particularly important, although the document itself goes well beyond these points. First of all it laid down that education must be free of racism, an obvious point for the ANC to make; secondly, it must be democratic in content and in structure; thirdly, and perhaps this is the pivotal point, that it must equip the young people of South Africa who have passed through that school--equip them to take their part in the struggle for national liberation in the present and in the future to build a liberated South Africa. So it was very much conceived that the

school could not be treated in political isolation but that the policy of the ANC in general and in particular in relation to the school must be structured in terms of the political demands. That too, of course, was a conception which we had to argue about because a number of people came to the meeting saying--particularly coming out of South Africa where education is so political for blacks, but political in a certain kind of way--that somehow we must neutralize education and it must present "objective truth," and that issue, as I say, was fought out very strenuously and it was clarified in the end that for a national liberation movement the relationship of politics and education is really an unbreakable one and ANC education must be directed in that way.

Now, what the meeting did was to establish an education department which in a certain sense consisted of the education committees which at the time existed in London, in Tanzania itself, in Zambia, and actually in the United States in New York. The function of those committees had been largely logistical up to then, collecting books for people in the camps and for the little school in Tanzania but their task was extremely limited and they were not allocated the task, more importantly, of working out the content of syllabuses and the mode of instruction. The physical construction of the school was left to a committee established on the site of the school and its task was to bring ANC youth into the building of the school. In other words, the school was not going to be built by professional builders; it was going to be built by the participants in the school themselves.

The ultimate project was to have something like 1,000 South Africans at the school, complete with dormitories, restaurants, cultural centers, and so on. At the moment it has something like 200 students and a number of buildings which the students and the ANC construction workers have begun to build; it has a small number of teachers and it has a small administrative staff.

Well, so much for the bare bones. I would like to make some remarks about the content of teaching because that is the important issue and I am not going to go into any detail. If any person raises pertinent questions perhaps we can discuss that.

Let me make it clear, first of all, that there is a strong notion, and I think it has a certain legitimacy, that establishing a school which teaches African youth science subjects and denudes the content of other subjects, of racism itself, is a political education as against Bantu education, and of course there is a certain amount of truth in that. Whatever the limitations in the kinds of conventional education that many of us are used to which would give a much broader education to young South Africans it would be an enormous step forward and a blow

to Bantu education. But of course, as I have already indicated for the ANC that is not enough. We have to confront, for example issues such as the distinction between manual and mental labor, the distinctions between manual and mental learning, between theory and practice if you like. We have to confront the issue of the way in which knowledge is socially located and appropriated differentially by different kinds of class interests and therefore the ANC had to consider what the priorities were with in each subject and what kind of course structures in general should be erected. We had to consider the question of politicization. I have already pointed out that many of the young people who have come out of South Africa have already a limited knowledge of the struggles of the people; they have a very distorted conception of South African history because they are taught from a racist point of view, from the point of view in which black South Africans are always the passive recipients of the worldly wisdom of colonialism and who never play an active part in the struggles and in the conditions of the country. And that politicization that had been made clear is not something which is only for the people because, as I have already indicated, those of us who were on the planning side already knew from the teachers who were present in the school that they too have to go through a process of cleansing; that the conceptions which we were reared with which we have to confront in our daily lives reassert themselves in the kinds of way in which educational relations are actually linked in the school so that the process of politicization is of considerable importance for the staff and students alike.

I don't want to deal with any other subject. The social sciences play a crucial role. Undoubtedly the development of the content of social courses has been the point of the most conflict and of the most debate in the preparation of the school. But the way in which that has been structured is first of all to include a subject called "The History of the Struggle" which is a compulsory subject for whoever goes to that school and wherever point they might end to. It sets up at least the main parameters in which the struggle has evolved throughout South African history. Then there is a subject called "Development of Society" which is an attempt to present the basic concepts for social analysis. And then thirdly, there is a history which begins with pre-colonial Africa and goes its way up to the immediate present and is of course linked to "The History of the Struggle" that has a much broader perspective.

Now, the teaching document is some 12 or 15 pages and is a very detailed attempt to provide a structure for the history that it does not simply appear chronologically, but also uncovers the specific historical structures and dynamics at different moments in the history of Africa, and in particular South Africa and employs and continuously utilizes the more general concepts which are part of this course called "Development of Society."

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But the problem then arises about how to teach history. Do we begin whatever the year of the origins of African history, pre-colonial history, and go our way up to the present moment? The conclusion we came to, as a starting point anyway--this still has to be put in practice--was that we ought to begin with the present and then work our way back. Why? Because the question that the present poses is "How come the present is as it is?" And then this begins to open up questions about the historical development which led to the structure of present-day South Africa.

So perhaps it will be of interest if I say two or three words of how we have gone on that, or how we are proposing to go. The proposal is that the people who enter the school in their first year should be asked right at the beginning of the course to write essays about their own lives, discussing where they had lived, in town or country, what their mothers and fathers do, the style of work and life, their knowledge of any political activities, of the pass laws, of the Bantu administration department functioning, and so on. And then to utilize those essays in order to prepare a teaching plan, the more general experiences expressed in those very kinds of immediate responses of the teacher, and to use in the first and second year of teaching those essays as a point of departure for the analysis of the conditions both in the countryside and the urban areas so that they have on the one hand a very direct connotation and meaning for the student and yet do not allow that experience to be limited to the immediate experience of the youth but begin to be expanded out in terms of more general conceptions which in the third, fourth, and fifth years will become the subject of a proper history in taking chronological themes and structural themes.

What I am simply indicating, of course, is, in a very limited and very schematic way, some of the questions we confronted, mentioning very briefly one or two of the answers that we came up with.

So finally I want to deal with a more practical problem. It seems to us that the ANC--although indeed that had been a struggle in the ANC itself--has begun to understand that education is simply not a matter for education; that precisely because education is conceived of as having a direct bearing on the conduct of the struggle at the moment and on the development of South Africa afterwards that it is too important to limit education to conventional education alone, that obviously we must deploy the expertise of education, but that it has to be politicised and to be incorporated into the political definition of the tasks. And consequently this question is an ongoing one. There are all kinds of advances which are made in the way the schools are sought about and there are retreats and defeats, if

you like, because the positive success of one year tends to get lost sometimes with the development and in the problems that arise--because there are enormous problems in trying to construct the school from the ground upwards in terms of manpower resources, the kinds of politicisation of discipline--a very important problem in schools if you intend to democratize it--and so on; these tasks have involved, among other things, particularly in the social sciences, the questions of "where are the texts--especially at the level of the school--which we can hand to the teachers who are teaching the history of South Africa in particular but of Africa generally?" We don't have the texts. We have a number of texts of a very complex kind, written for the academy at the level of the university. We have some early historical texts written by the movement in South Africa, but we do not have the schoolbooks and the sort of components for teachers because the pupils don't have the kind of historical education necessary. So that is a major task and as far as social science is concerned, London has been allocated to that task and is grinding under the burden. So the one question is: "Are there people here or anywhere in the States who would be able to contribute under the guidance of the London Education Committee to the writing of the social texts for secondary schools?" Not for children because these are not children; many of them are 17, 18, and 19 and older and even many of them are going into the lower classes and they are also not children, not only in age terms but also because of the experiences which they have gone through in South Africa. So the whole question of the production of the materials of learning is of a considerable importance.

Then indeed we need teachers. Now the policy of the ANC is that in the first instance teachers should be drawn from the ranks of the ANC. But that is not an invariable rule and of course although there are working processes and so on there is a need for teachers and the ANC would welcome applicants who could be considered to go out for a couple of years at a time to undertake teaching in the school.

Thirdly, there is the problem I have already referred to: money and equipment. The school desperately needs duplicating machines and reproduction machines because a lot of the material will have to be produced and reproduced there. It needs writing materials, it needs books, and of course it needs money in particular for those kinds of things to be purchased under the coordinating committees which are functioning between the school, London, and so on.

And finally it is calling for people to come out to the school, for example during university summer holidays, to undertake, under the structure of the school, partly some teaching, partly construction work, partly agricultural work, because

there is an effort to break down the distinction between manual and mental labor, between theory and practice, and the school is not merely a school, it is a project. It has got a form; it has its own woodworkshop; it has its own electrical workshops, and so on, and this project is meant to involve people in all the activities, self-training, as well as the production of the school as an ongoing unit.

So these are some of the tasks that are required to be done. I hope I have told enough about the school to give you a flavor of it, but if not, of course, I will be happy to try to answer questions.



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