



group of Soweto junior high school students at a single school protested the use of Afrikaans (the official language of the oppressors) as a medium of instruction. The revolt of high school students against the enforcement of learning in the Boer language was significant in itself. It marked, from the outset, a highly advanced struggle to the extent that it was a rejection of the colonisation of consciousness which triggered off the insurrection, even when so many other material reasons for resistance existed.

Initially, however, the Soweto student protest followed the traditional defeatist lines of oppositional politics: the students boycotted classes. But in a community such as Soweto, where any contestation immediately brings down upon itself the entire repressive apparatus, symbolic protest cannot be contained to the symbol, but must overflow into the realm of real struggle. For a community that is all too well acquainted with lumpen criminality and with unrelenting brutality on a daily basis, violence is always a ready-at-hand implement to pit against the contradictions of daily life. The striking students were no exception. Not for them the “ponderous” problem of morality and constraint. A teacher who ignored student demands was stabbed by screwdriver-wielding youths. Police were stoned. Two government officials were killed by a young man from Soweto.

In a matter of days the students had gained the support of their parents, and had coerced the teachers into backing their demands. The authorities still refused to concede. Afrikaans remained as a medium of instruction.

At this point the confrontation between the students and the state (in the institutionalised form of the school) was contained to, at the most, a handful of campuses. How was the transformation made so that these grievances ignited the fury of all black South Africa? Those who sought the answer in the form of an effective and extensive centralised organization – be they the South African state on the search for scapegoats, or the international humanitarian conscience on the search for superstars – were in for a rude surprise. (Eventually the South African state was able to fabricate its scapegoats whom the international opposition were then able to turn into superstars. Thus symbiotically, the state and its pseudo-opposition succeeded in fooling themselves and almost everybody else except the real participants in the struggle, by recreating the events that began on June 16, in their own image.)

But there were no leaders – only a handful of militant individuals (prior to June 16), inspired by their frustration in the face of unyielding authority, who with the help of friends set out to organise something, the content of which, let alone the consequences, they were in no position to anticipate.

