

# Soweto Uprisings: ‘This is our day’

By: Janice Dowson

16 June 2016 marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soweto Uprising, when approximately 20,000 students from schools in Soweto began protesting against the Bantu Education System, in particular changes that made Afrikaans the language of instruction alongside English. Since the fall of apartheid in 1994, June 16<sup>th</sup> has been a public holiday – Youth Day – held to commemorate the Soweto Uprising and celebrate South Africa’s youth.

*“Soweto is a symbol of the New South Africa, caught between old squatter misery and new prosperity, squalor and an upbeat lifestyle, it’s a vibrant city which still openly bears the scars of the Apartheid past and yet shows what’s possible in the New South Africa” [1]*

## Soweto

Soweto – name derived from **SO**uth **WE**st **TO**wnship - is the largest township area in South Africa, and, though once an independent municipality, it is now located within Johannesburg’s municipal boundaries. Presently, it is estimated that one-third of Johannesburg’s population lives in Soweto. The discovery of gold brought many black workers to the area for employment; starting as early as 1904 under British rule, segregationist housing policies and plans forced black workers out of the city to the outskirts, and in 1904 the first township south west of the city centre was founded – Klipspruit. In the 1950s, apartheid housing policies forced more black workers out of the city centre and the south west township areas grew rapidly. There was little planning for the rapid growth, and the apartheid government allocated few resources to the township, which has also suffered from high unemployment, overcrowding and poor housing and infrastructure. In 1963, the name Soweto became the official title for the cluster of south western townships, and presently it is estimated that 29 separate townships make up Soweto, including Klipspruit (the original) and Orlando (long time home of Nelson Mandela).



## Soweto and Anti-apartheid Activism

Under apartheid, Soweto was an important place for apartheid resistance and anti-apartheid organizing. Home to several prominent figures in the anti-apartheid resistance movement, such as Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Walter and Albertina Sisula. In 1955 the ANC’s Freedom Charter was adopted in Freedom Square in Kliptown township.

## Freedom Charter

26 June 1955 – The Congress Alliance – made up of the African National Congress (ANC), South African Indian Congress, The Coloured People’s Congress, the South African Congress of Trade Unions, and the Congress of Democrats – held a Congress of the People. Three thousand people gathered in Kliptown and adopted the Freedom Charter.

It states: “We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people;” [2].

## Soweto Uprisings

On 16 June 1976, students throughout Soweto gathered at their respective schools in an organized response to the new stipulation in the Bantu Education Act that required that Afrikaans (the so-called language of apartheid) be a language of instruction for black students alongside English. The students planned to conduct a protest march through Soweto, which would culminate in a final rally at the Orlando soccer stadium. As a crowd of students grew to an estimated 20,000, the students were met on their way to the stadium by members of the South African police force. After failing to break up the crowd of students with tear gas and warning shots, police eventually opened fire into the crowd.

The official number of children and youth killed by the violent police response to the protests is 23, but this number is surely a low estimate; unofficial estimates put the death count between 200 and 700. Shortly after the first shots were fired into the crowd, Sam Nzima, a photographer for the *The World*, snapped the iconic photo of the fatally wounded 12-year-old Hector Pieterse, being carried by fellow student, Mbuyisa Makhubo, while Hector’s sister runs alongside. See photo (right) [3]. On 16 June 2002, The Hector Pieterse Museum, the first museum in the community, opened next to the Hector Pieterse memorial, which stands near the spot where the boy was fatally wounded.





Poster Hanging on Jameson Hall at UCT; depicts the UCT solidarity protests in 1976

The *Afrikaans Medium Decree* of 1974, but implemented in 1976, required that black students received their school instruction half in English and half in Afrikaans. Afrikaans would become the language of instruction for math and social studies, while English would remain the language of instruction for science and the practical trade classes. As the language of the apartheid government, Afrikaans was seen as ‘the language of the oppressor’.

Black students and their instructors were frustrated by the addition of Afrikaans as the language of instruction, not just because of its association with apartheid, but because the students and in a lot of cases the instructors did not speak or understand Afrikaans, and thus were falling behind. Though, the implementation of the *Afrikaans Medium Decree* is often seen as the immediate cause of the uprising, there had been building tensions over apartheid era education.

## Bantu Education Act, 1953

The Bantu Education Act, 1953 was the legislation that provided for racially segregated education. Often seen as one of the most overtly racist apartheid policies, the Act was designed to train black children for menial labour that would serve white society and the white economy.

Bantu schools were overcrowded and underfunded; student to teacher ratios were routinely 58:1. Similarly, the apartheid government spent 644 Rand per white student and just 42 Rand per black student. Fewer than half of black schools had plumbing, 30 percent did not have electricity and 25 percent did not have running water.

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*“16 June, then, has become a day of mourning in Soweto. It is a day when we remain at home and lick our wounds and comfort one another. Words cannot really convey what we continue to feel years after that dreadful day. Our hearts still bleed for our boys and girls who lost their lives, who were tormented and tortured in detention, who disappeared without trace, who have become wanderers and beggars in foreign countries – and all this, all this, triggered by conflict over the language the children were to learn in school” – Ellen Kuzwayo [4]*

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## Steve Biko (1946-1977)

In 1968, while a medical student, Steve Biko co-founded the South Africans Student Organisations (SASO). The SASO's objective was to raise black consciousness amongst black students. After leaving medical school, Steve Biko, founded the Black Consciousness Movement.

Biko became an important anti-apartheid activist, and the Black Consciousness Movement supported the Soweto students' protests. Three years prior to the uprisings, Biko had been "banned" by the apartheid government. Being banned made it an offence for anyone to quote Biko, for Biko to speak to more than one person at a time, and drastically restricted his movement. After the Soweto Uprisings, Biko became an even larger target of the South African security forces and, on 18 August 1977, was ultimately arrested under the Terrorism Act.

After many sessions of aggressive police interrogation, Biko suffered a catastrophic head injury. On 12 September 1977, Biko succumbed to his injuries in the Pretoria prison hospital. The circumstances, which led to his death remain unclear and contested. In 1999, five members of the security forces applied for – and were denied – amnesty in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 2003, the government announced the five officers would not be prosecuted for their roles in Biko's death.

What began as a peaceful protest turned violent after police fired into the crowd and the uprising continued for several days. Protestors began targeting all symbols of apartheid rule, in particular burning the West Rand Administrative vehicles and buildings in Soweto. By the morning of 17 June nearly all West Rand Administrative property has been destroyed.

Protestors had also beaten a West Rand Administrative official to death. On 17 June, 1,500 police officers and armoured vehicles entered Soweto, tensions grew and violence on one side begat a violent response on the other. As police continued to shoot protestors indiscriminately, the anger of the school children grew more intense. Student protests sprang up throughout South Africa in solidarity with the Soweto students. All numbers of those injured or killed during the Soweto Uprising are estimates, however, it is clear that the police were responsible for approximately 70 percent of deaths and injuries.



University of Cape Town Students' Union – renamed in honour of Steve Biko.

## My Education

My parents always promoted the importance of education to me, and my brother and sister. In particular, my dad always imparted to us how going to university allowed him to escape the poverty of his youth. For the three of us, attending university was not an option, but an expected step after finishing high school. I never really took school all that seriously, not even during my undergraduate degree. I always just took it for granted; I regret that deeply now. It wasn't until I was writing my M.A. thesis, when I actually started to understand that education was not something to be taken for granted. When I began my PhD, I made a conscious decision to finally approach my schooling with the seriousness it deserved and I have tried to abide by that decision. I have been in South Africa for a month and a half now, and much of that time I was working in office space at the University of Cape Town (UCT), in an office associated with my host organization, and my time on campus has been enlightening.



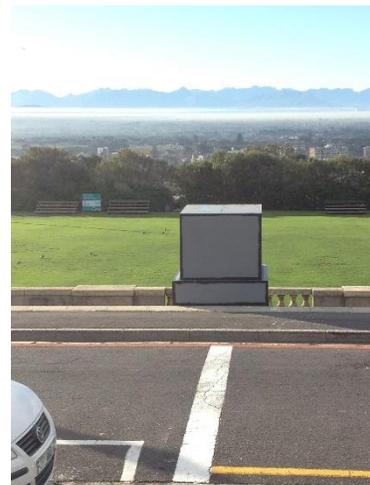
University campuses across South Africa right now are increasingly sites of political struggle. Walking around the UCT campus there are hints of growing tensions in the student body. In March 2015 a protest movement called 'Rhodes Must Fall' started demanding that the imposing bronze statue of Cecil Rhodes be removed in the name of decolonising education. In April 2015, the Cecil Rhodes statue was removed and its base covered in plywood that has since been painted. Certain paintings across campus have also been removed or covered up in response to the decolonising campus campaigns.



UCT – Rhodes Statute [5]



Base of Rhodes Statue – June 17



Rhodes old seat – looking over rugby fields, middle campus and Cape Flats

The Rhodes Must Fall campaign morphed into the 'Fees Must Fall' campaign by October 2015. Protests started at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg as a response to an announced tuition fee increase of 10.5 percent for the following year. Protests spread to university campuses throughout South Africa. On 21 October, some protestors from UCT and Cape Peninsula University breached the fences surrounding the Parliament buildings in Cape Town. Riot police used batons, tasers, tear gas and stun grenades to control the crowd and several protestors were arrested. Over the next few days, protests continued on South Africa's university campuses, and on 23 October 2015, President Jacob Zuma announced that there would be no fee increase for the following year.



On 15 February 2015, Fees Must Fall protestors constructed a shack at UCT in order to protest the lack of student housing for black students. Increasing violent clashes between university security, police and the protestors, ended when eight protestors were arrested. On Youth Day, I attended a community screening of a documentary, *Action Kommandant*, in Bonteheuwel, a township in the Cape Flats. Before the screening, several of the student leaders of the Fees Must Fall campaign addressed the crowd – some of whom had been given notice of their expulsion from UCT the previous day. As I listened to them speak so passionately about why they were continuing to protest for decolonising university education, and how the cost of university remains a barrier for most of South Africa's black population, it made me think about my opportunities at UCT and the University of Victoria.

Learning about the historical struggle and witnessing ongoing student attempts to secure fair education for all, my time in South Africa has instilled in me a deep appreciation of how fortunate I have been to pursue freely my educational opportunities, particularly this field research trip. Though I have always understood it at an intellectual level, I now understand it at a deeper and more personal level. It has also sparked a desire in me to work to ensure that all Canadian students who want to go to university are able to do so in a fair and affordable manner; a situation not yet realized.

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## NOTES AND FURTHER READING

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### Notes:

[1] Unknown. *Soweto Website*. [http://www.soweto.co.za/html/i\\_overview.htm](http://www.soweto.co.za/html/i_overview.htm)

[2] Congress of the People. 1955. *Freedom Charter*. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/freedom-charter>

[3] Photo credit: Sam Nzima. 16 June 1976. *The World*.

[4] Ellen Kuzwayo. 2004 [1996]. *Call Me Woman*. Northlands: Picador Africa, pp. 50-51

[5]. Photo: *UCT – Statue of Rhodes*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:UCT\\_Cape\\_Town\\_-\\_Statue\\_of\\_Rhodes.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:UCT_Cape_Town_-_Statue_of_Rhodes.jpg)

### Further Reading:

[A] South African History Online. *The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising*:

<http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising>

[B] South African History Online. *Soweto*. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/places/soweto>