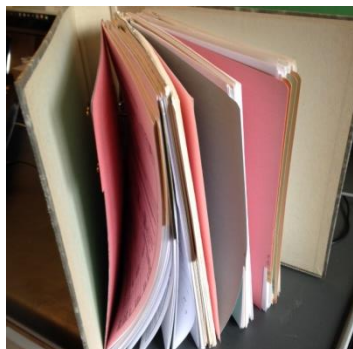


INTERNATIONAL TEACHING COMMUNITY AND SOUTH AFRICA SEVEN CRUCIAL YEARS: 1985 - 1992

SEVEN FOLDERS



Seven folders in total contain the history of the international teaching community and the South African teachers organisation. The seven folders cover the period 1986 till 1992. Six years that turned out to be crucial in the history of South African unionism. They cover the period from Apartheid towards the shaping of a non-racial state. They contain official documents drafted by the international teachers confederation WCOTP and its affiliates. Documents with official status. Of greater interest however is the abundance of handwritten notes by staff members and officials. Personal notes, faxes and telexes. All were put in these files and give the additional flavour.

I brought these files with me from the offices of Education International in Brussels. I stored them for about a decade. In a safe place so as to ensure they would not get lost or be tossed. Would that be so bad? Yes, I would think so, since the seven folders comprise an important period in the history of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and its predecessors. The seven folders were carefully administered and organised by staff members of the WCOTP, the biggest international teachers organisation till it merged with the IFFTU in 1991 to become Education International.

A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

These folders give an interesting insight into the complex relationship between teachers unions in Europe and North America on the one hand and the South African teachers organisations operating in the days of the Apartheid regime. Questions arose like: Is it possible to maintain a working relationship with South African teachers organisations willing to operate in a system based upon the dividing lines of race and colour? And, are these organisations still respected and seen as representative by the majority of the South African teachers themselves?

The documentation starts in 1986. Why not before? Most likely because it is the year the WCOTP started its first programme of cooperation with its sole South African affiliate, ATASA. The acronym itself reflects the cruelty of the Apartheid system: a teachers union for blacks only. They had their segregated African Teachers Association of South Africa. Indians were organised in TASA, coloured in UTASA and whites had their own variety of organisations. All in perfect order with the demands imposed by the regime.

In March 1986, the WCOTP Board adopted a resolution stating that 'the principles of cooperation with non-racial teacher organisations opposing apartheid in South Africa be approved, provided that their goals are consistent with WCOTP policy and that ATASA is fully consulted. WCOTP's goal is encouraging the formation of a single non-racial teachers' organisation representing all teachers opposed to apartheid in South Africa.'

Even though the Danish teachers union is posing a lot of question on this resolution, it is adopted and from then onward, ATASA is the sole South African teachers organisation to be supported. It is the view of WCOTP that ATASA, itself the product of Apartheid is to lead the process towards a non-racial organisation. A process which can have only one outcome: ATASA is to be dissolved but should be the firm foundation for the non-racial teachers organisation. So, before that ultimate goal is reached: all support from the powerful WCOTP and its financially strong affiliates from Scandinavia

and North America is to be channeled via ATASA. As one of the informal notes indicates: this resolution provides the prospect that the 'Swedish funds are unlocked'.

It certainly was not a board decision which came about easily. The Swedish Teachers Union – an important player within the WCOTP – obtained information from its embassy in Pretoria on the teachers' situation in South Africa. A memo from the Swedish embassy of March 3, 1986 to the Swedish Teachers Union states unequivocally that any support given to South African teachers should focus on NEUSA, the progressive teachers' organisation, newly emerged within the turbulent South Africa suffering from the state of emergency. The embassy provides a strong argument: the newly formed trade union center COSATU will not accept ATASA to be its member, due to its conservative stand. "The goal is to form only one trade union for teachers, with NEUSA as a base". The point is made but will not prevent the WCOTP from putting all its cards on its sole affiliate in South Africa, ATASA.

PROFESSIONALISM IN A POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

It is not only the representative of the Swedish embassy which expresses its preference in favour of the changed reality on the ground. The Swedish teachers union Fackläraeren hires a free lance journalist (name never disclosed) who (in 1985) also reports in very positive wording on NEUSA and in particular on its president Thomas Bopane. The journalist quotes Bopane saying 'The black teachers' organisation ATASA to which I must belong in order to be allowed to teach, condemns apartheid in word but not in deed.'

And 'the apartheid system will not be abolished through educational reforms but through nation-wide political struggle'. But – key questions – does ATASA, the WCOTP affiliate have the courage to stand up and proclaim a political struggle? And is the organisation truly reflecting the voice of the teachers or has the organisation been taken over by the new reality?

So, how to read the political developments within South Africa? And how to translate this into support to teachers organisations? These questions have been a bone of contention within the international teaching community. Not only within the WCOTP but also within its smaller rival, the International Federation of Free Teachers' Unions, IFFTU. For example: the French teachers unions call for joining the international day against apartheid. A political choice made by the French teachers movement since the political environment within South Africa asks for a clear stand. However, this call is turned down by the WCOTP president. It is in his view too political. The WCOTP is – as the acronym indicates – of the Teaching Profession, which does imply emphasis on professionalism and a degree of neutralism. Remarkably. Some representatives within the WCOTP show a rather positive view on the political developments in South Africa. It was only a few years before, in 1981, when the assistant Secretary General of the WCOTP, Mr. Raymond J. Smyke wrote a six page confidential report to the Executive Committee on the teacher situation in South Africa. His three week visit resulted in the following conclusion: 'By any standard, compared with South Africa's past, this Government is open to movement but without making fundamental changes in racial policy'. He furthermore expresses that he hopes that 'progressive' factions' will win at the next (all white,ws) elections. He describes Transkei and Venda as 'already independent'.

His report also contains an interesting paragraph on NEUSA, 'formed during the school boycotts'. 'It is an organisation of individuals which stated publicly and openly that it will do away with the bona fide teacher organisations in South Africa. The three teachers organisations (ATASA, TASA and UTASA) advised WCOTP that his (NEUSA's) effort is not serious and that it should be ignored.' In other words, let's go on pretending nothing has changed and that serious progress is being made in South Africa.

ATASA's BALANCING ACT and INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

It is the light of these two conflicting opinions that ATASA is able to maintain a monopoly position as the sole South African teachers organisation operating at international level. Such monopoly in representation of the South African teachers at international level through the membership of the WCOTP is not only to its advantage. It also puts a burden on ATASA. Within the rapidly changing environment – the coming about of COSATU, UDF, students movement etc. - ATASA has no option but to move forward. It has to ensure a certain degree of credibility at international level by proving support from the teaching community at national level.

The SOWETAN of March 17 1986 reports 'ATASA has finally crossed the line and thrown its lot behind the black political struggle against apartheid.' ATASA ends all cooperation with the Department of Education and Training (DET). A major step forward. It had no other option so as to maintain a level of credibility. But is it enough?

Following the decisions taken at political level – through resolutions and statements - support from the international teaching community is coming.

In that crucial month of March 1986 a decisive meeting is held in Gaborone, capital of neighbouring Botswana. The meeting is attended by the top leadership of ATASA and a host of international participants from WCOTP affiliates. Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Canadians as well as the African leadership. The purpose is to provide concrete support to ATASA. It is decided to take a comprehensive approach including organisational support, increased recruitment and improved organisational capacity, legal and humanitarian defence, professional development of teachers and – last but not least – the development of an alternative education programme. In brief : a full package of cooperation in support of ATASA.

However, prior to actually providing this support programme, the European and North American WCOTP representatives hold an interesting and intensive internal discussion on the position to be taken vis a vis South African teacher unionism. The American NEA reports in an internal memo that 'WCOTP's policy regarding Apartheid indicates that it will only affiliate, and work directly with, ATASA in South Africa and will hold other teacher organisations at arms length at present.' The author of the memo is apparently taking the same view as the WCOTP. His statement is – again – reflecting an unlimited optimism that international support will be decisive on what happens on the – national – ground. And, secondly, it reflects great optimism that it is ATASA which can bring about change.

The then president of the All African Teachers Organisation, the Nigerian Itotoh, takes a more realistic view. At the Gaborone meeting he states that 'we are concerned that ATASA stays safe but does not necessarily take the lowest lying level of land as the river does and hence cannot help but meander.' A poetic way of saying that 'We are concerned that ATASA be not estranged from other teachers in South Africa, NEUSA for example.' He even takes a wider view with his remark: 'we are concerned that world teachers do not lose sight of the bigger problem while solving a smaller one.' Itotoh's point is well taken, but the funding agencies have already decided that support is to be provided to ATASA, and ATASA only.

For all clarity: what did ATASA look like in those days? ATASA, with a membership claim of 60,000 with a potential of 130,000, had 1 clerical staff member and as of March 1986 HH Dlamlenze was its full time Secretary General. The structures of the organisation were identified as 'weak' and its financial reserve was in the range of 15,000 USD. Such was the position of ATASA in March 1986. It is a weak basis and a certain risk for the international teaching community. Will ATASA be able to implement the programmes and handle the funds for the implementation of the wide range of programs? And funds are coming: in 1986 the Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF) starts its South African Teacher Assistance Fund. Can\$ 25,000 to start with. This is way below the request submitted by ATASA in March 1988. The project proposal is in the range of no less than four million Can\$

covering a five year period. Key question: will an organisation of such weak structure be able to handle the funds that are pouring in through the international solidarity? The true answer to this question is found in a memo written in 1990 when the WCOTP reports : ' in order to avoid the problems and frustrations, we encountered earlier with ATASA', referring to the difficulties ATASA is facing in implementing the tasks.

INTERNATIONAL RIVALRY

The seven folders only contain documents assembled by the WCOTP. It reflects just one side of the coin. Till the merger in 1991, there was also the much smaller international teachers organisation IFFTU. Till that date WCOTP and IFFTU were heavily competing organisations. Also with regard to South Africa. WCOTP had its affiliate ATASA. The IFFTU did not have an affiliate but connected well with NEUSA and other progressive teachers organisations. And, in addition, it had its good connections through the newly born COSATU, the trade union confederation. Not only within the WCOTP but also within the IFFTU considerable difference in opinion could be seen on the key question: with whom to cooperate. Whilst the European organisations within IFFTU expressed preference for the non-racial COSATU, the powerful American Federation of Teachers (AFT) opted for working with unions driven by the Black Conscience Movement in South Africa.

All in all, going through the documents it can be noted that all through the years prior to the formation of Education International in 1991, the players at international and at national level seek to move their interests towards the most favorable and most favored position. Often through discarding the other international. The WCOTP states that those organisations who cooperate with the IFFTU 'are not now and will not be in the future, teacher trade unions.' Rather than seeking dialogue, both international seek to get the most favorable profile. The Norwegian affiliate to the IFFTU writes that 'ATASA on the contrary is divided into races and is open to cooperation with the regime.' The Norwegian affiliate to the WCOTP expresses its anger over this statement and so the fight goes on. At international level the WCOTP denounces the 'so called conference' of the IFFTU in Lusaka in 87. 'IFFTU pursues no significant anti-apartheid programme' and talks about 'the venomous reaction of IFFTU'. Also NEUSA and others who attended the IFFTU meeting are labelled as 'these so called progressive organisations are not trade unions'.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN AGENDA

In the meantime the South Africans develop their own agenda. In August 1988 COSATU facilitates teacher unity talks in Harare because it has a keen interest in building one single post apartheid teachers organisation. COSATU indicated that it would only work with one and one teachers organisation only. It is through the personal involvement of its General Secretary Jay Naidoo that COSATU pushes the issue. With a clear condition: 'that parallel unity talks be discontinued in favour of the one initiated in Harare'. COSATU takes the lead and the process is fully back in South African hands. Much to the dislike of the South African Government, which has one and one interest only: to keep the teachers under control by keeping them divided and above all: far away from the political arena. In May 1988 the minister of education FW de Klerk issues a statement that 'teachers are members of a profession and trade unionism is not a machine that was designed for professionals. It would detract from the professionalism of the teachers if the forming of trade unions was allowed.'

POSITION: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

Time moves on and so does the WCOTP. It notes that it can no longer solely put all eggs in the ATASA basket. But rather than moving towards newly emerging organisations it continues to rely upon existing – established – organisations. In 1989 UTASA – the organisation for the coloured teachers headed by Franklin Sonn - is invited for having a meeting with the WCOTP. From then onward, ATASA

no longer has the monopoly position. The meeting is held following a letter of Jack de Mars, the international secretary of the American NEA to UTASA. In October 1988 he writes : 'It is therefore clear to me that the time has come for embracing UTASA within the family of educators within the WCOTP. We have tried..... but obstacles beyond our control have prevented it to date'. He adds that '.... Your organization is no less entitled to admission than any other anti-apartheid teacher organization in South Africa.' The doors are open, but is it the door to an organisation with perspective to a bright future, or an organisation which can only be dissolved once Apartheid is abolished. It is the issue which will come about shortly: federation or unitary organisation.

All through the years leading to the formation of SADTU in 1990 the notes from the WCOTP folders reflect doubt and debate on how to proceed with its affiliate ATASA. In a letter written by Secretary General Norman Goble to the WCOTP president, Goble reports on his meeting with NEUSA president, Curtis N'Kondo. ' He said that while the children were being shot in the streets by the police, ATASA continued such activities as music competitions as though nothing was happening.' He does not comment on the remark made by N'kondo, but his thoughts are clear: can we continue like we did with ATASA?



Also Tom Bediako (picture on the left), a major player and most relied upon within WCOTP sends in his report on his visit to South Africa in 1988. He notes that some change is at hand; that ATASA is coming closer to trade union movement and other organisations opposed to apartheid. Still, there is – as always - the doubt and critical approach: ' Despite the restrictions in South Africa, I believe ATASA can publish more anti-Apartheid news.' Which leads to the recommendation to have other organisations - NEUSA, TASA en

UTASA - benefit from the ATASA programme. Bediako also sends out a warning signal to the donor community stating that it is ATASA which is to develop its own programme 'rather than ATASA's needs determined or conditioned by objectives and priorities of cooperation organisations.'

The letters by Goble and Bediako are fine examples of the position taken by the WCOTP: to the outside world, the WCOTP is able to keep its concerns and worries well hidden. Internally, there is a constant flow of concerns, worries and doubts on the performance and strength of its sole affiliate. In an internal memo the later WCOTP Secr. Gen. Robert Harris writes in March 1988 on the issue of unity, inclusion and exclusion. 'The WCOTP is an organisation of the 'rassemblement': bringing everybody together. ' We have the strong feeling that the leaders of ATASA and UTASA have tended to operate more on the 'exclusion' concept.' He continues to express his worries on ATASA and UTASA : 'Dlamlenze and Sonn tend to argue that the system must be changed first, then the teachers organisations can amalgamate completely' . And: 'However, it is clear that there is a strong current of opinion, a very strong current within the South African community in favour of forming organisations which are clearly non-racial throughout their entire structure.'' The 'progressive teacher organisations reflect that strong current of opinion and will make it a condition for any move towards unity."

And as late as 1989 (!) an NEA researcher writes: ' Well over 90% of the active members in ATASA are principles. Teachers I spoke with seemed to feel that they are required to be members.' "Younger teachers who came out that student movement have little respect for ATASA.'

Ever more this kind of opinions on the established organisation gets into conflict with the channeling of funds. Political opinions shift, but the funds continue to be channeled through the sole affiliate, ATASA.

FEDERATION OR UNITARY ORGANISATION

ATASA sees the changes coming and – willingly or unwillingly - starts to take steps to adapt to the new reality. But whilst the mindset is shifting, the leadership has not taken the crucial decision leading to the dismantling of its organisation and making way for one single non-racial organisation. In January 1989 the report presented to the National Council of ATASA states that: 'Ideology should not be a precondition for unity'. In other words, we defend our territory, our independence.

Still, ATASA realizes it must move forward and in the end takes the crucial the decision that there is the need 'to establish a negotiation machinery and that as a matter of urgency COSATU should convene such machinery'. To what extent international pressure has led to this decision can not be traced. Still, it is a major step forward which puts the responsibility of bringing all teachers of South Africa together in the hands of the largest and most powerful trade union confederation : COSATU. To be noted: it still took quite some years before all teachers within the newly formed SADTU felt comfortable enough to join the trade union federation thus associating themselves with workers in all sectors of society: mining, metal, transport etc.

So, having entered the COSATU driven process of negotiation, what should be the shape of the new organisation? Should it go into the direction of a 'unitary Constitution' or a 'federation'. The answer is clear to almost all involved. But again, it takes ATASA quite a while to take this hurdle. ATASA could not give an answer until her conference had made a decision in January 1989. ATASA writes in an internal memo: 'There appeared to be a clear division between old and new organisations on the form the new organisation should take. The young associations preferred a unitary body; and the older associations saw it as an ideal in the distant future.' So, will it accept a rapid push for change and will COSATU succeed in this effort or will there be a protracted process including various stages and phases, ultimately leading to the same and inevitable conclusion. COSATU is in a hurry. Does not want to waste time and seeks to achieve the goal of the unitary teachers organisation in South Africa. And so are the 'new organisations'. In no way, any concession can be made to the apartheid regime and staying divided. Unity calls for a unitary organisation.



Launch of SADTU

And so the talks – led by COSATU – continue. Leading towards 1990: the year of the release of Nelson Mandela, the year in which COSATU en SACTU publish a joint statement through which SACTU will be integrated within COSATU. The year of major steps forward, also within the teaching community. The WCOTP Coördinator for Development programmes, Paula Robinson, writes in a memo to the Board that " WCOTP has been informed that the National Teachers' Forum comprised of ten teacher

organisations has established a Committee for the drafting of a Constitution for a new unitary non racial teachers' organisation". Plans are being made for the launch in October 1990. The decision is made in June 1990. Three months are left to complete this challenge. Budgeted expenditure for the launch is USD 200.000 (SAR 550.000). The organisation the launch is into the hands of COSATU, being the 'impartial body responsible for collecting funds for the teacher unity process.' Because 'it was impossible for ATASA to be accepted as a neutral broker in the process'. The international teaching community for once shows unity. WCOTP (80%) and IFFTU (20%) pay the bill and operate jointly as much as they can.

Success has many parents. Failure is an orphan. And so, on the road towards the launch of SADTU , the WCOTP comments on its own role in this process: 'However, it should be clearly understood that

although our South African partners are to be congratulated on their work, much of the pressure to push them towards unity was mounted by the cooperating partners outside of South Africa.' This is the image created. It will require a more in depth study to verify the truth of such statement. Does it match with reality? Or is equally true that the international organisations have also playing a role of delay and postponement in achieving unity. Again, an issue for further study.

THE LAUNCH



And so in October 1990 the launch of SADTU is a fact. Key note speaker is Nelson Mandela. Not all teachers join the new unitary organisation. And what does SADTU look like at that memorable moment? 11 regions; 139 branches; 36.459 members; membership dues of 3 SAR per month. Looked fine on paper. However, the major stumbling block presented itself immediately. Not all organisations were willing to dissolve and hand over all membership lists (and dues!) to the newly formed organisation. 'SADTU, however, has had to recruit members on an individual basis since the old unions have not dissolved'

states one of the first reports. In its 1991-1992 report SADTU states on the dissolution that 'the progress in this area has been positive as far as TASA is concerned, but ATASA and UTASA have not disbanded in the way that was foreseen.' But SADTU manages and literally tens of thousands of individual applications are being processed. These are the years of intensity. Years of building a teachers union from scratch in many ways. The elections of office bearers at all levels within the organisation. NEC, regional chairpersons. Staff was to be recruited. The process of recognition to be started. Membership recruitment; empowerment of women within SADTU; evaluation and inspection of teachers; crisis committee; legal defence; obtaining check off status. Thousands of issues to be addressed.

The launch does not mark the ending of the international cooperation. On the contrary. For a number of years the EI – SADTU Consortium convenes at least twice a year till the mid nineties. The international teaching community provided assistance wherever possible. Technical and financial. On a broad range of issues.

The launch did not mark the unity process. Some teachers organisations did not join. In July 1993, at the second national congress of SADTU the general secretary of EI was invited to address the congress. He states: "SADTU only!" And '...we made it absolutely clear that the international community would fully support SADTU and that no support would go to any other South African teachers' organisation. And that position still stands.' A position that was left a few years later by accepting the organisation which decided in 1990 step out of the unity process.

The seven folders have been shipped to the place where they belong: the offices of SADTU in Johannesburg. It is part of the history of SADTU. To be studied by historians interested in the coming about of a remarkable organisation in memorable times. All that is written in this paper is a selection from these folders and does not claim to be the complete story.

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