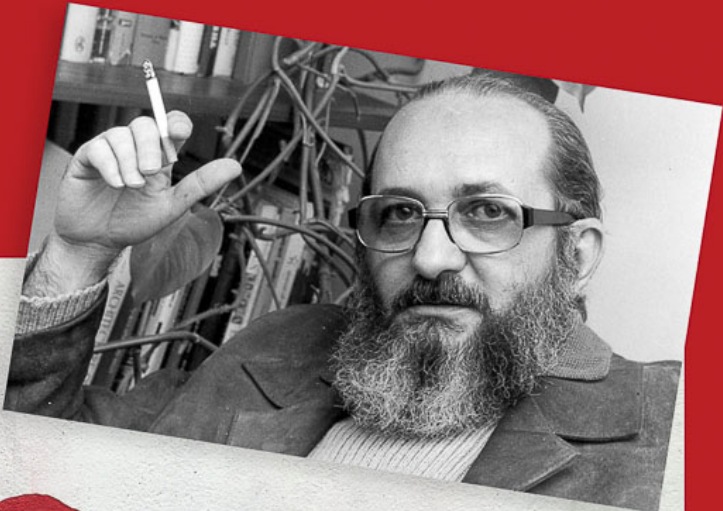


## Paulo Freire and Popular Struggle in South Africa

Paulo Freire was a radical educator from Brazil whose work was tied to struggles for human freedom and dignity. He constantly experimented with and thought about how to connect learning and teaching among the poor and oppressed with the radical transformation of society. For Freire, this meant struggling for a world where everyone counts equally and is treated with dignity — a world in which economic and political power are radically democratised.

This dossier, which draws on interviews with participants in a range of struggles in South Africa, shows that Freire's ideas have been an important influence in the Black Consciousness Movement, the trade union movement, and some of the organisations associated with the United Democratic Front (UDF). His ideas remain influential today, from trade unions to grassroots struggles.



## Mural of Paulo Freire at the entrance to the Florestan Fernandes National School of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) in Guararema, Brazil, 2018.

Richard Pithouse

### From Brazil to Africa

Freire was born in Recife, a city in north eastern Brazil, in 1921. After his university studies, he became a schoolteacher and began to develop an interest in radical approaches to education, including projects to teach adult literacy. Freire saw the role of community and worker organisations and struggles as vital in the formation of the critical conscience that is required to overcome the domination and dependence of the oppressed.

In Freire's early works, he wrote that the fundamental goal of radical pedagogy is to develop a critical conscience in individuals. The method of dialogical engagement that he developed from the 1950s onwards became an emancipatory and progressive alternative to the dominant school programmes sponsored by the US government through agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), an organisation that is notorious for backing coups against elected governments in Latin America and elsewhere.

In 1964, the Brazilian military seized control of the country with the backing of the United States and imposed a brutal right-wing dictatorship. Freire was among the many people arrested by the dictatorship. After seventy days in prison, he was released and forced to leave the country.

During his years in exile, he continued to carry out his practical work in other countries in Latin America, such as Chile, where he wrote his most important book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and developed adult literacy programmes. He also had significant contact with African freedom struggles. During this time, he visited Zambia, Tanzania, Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe, Angola, and Cape Verde. He met with The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo), and the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC). He developed adult literacy programmes in Guinea-Bissau, Tanzania, and Angola.

Freire read extensively about colonisation and its effects on the people, including the writings of African revolutionary intellectuals like Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral. He felt a special connection to Africa and wrote that '[a]s a man from north-eastern Brazil, I was somewhat culturally tied to Africa, particularly to those countries that were unfortunate enough to be colonised by Portugal'.

Freire was also deeply critical of the capitalist system, which exploits and dominates the bodies and minds of the oppressed, and is a major force generating the material and ideological conditions that shape the domination of consciousness. This domination — which, of course, is entwined with racism and sexism — can seep into our being, our actions, and the way that we see the world. Freire argued that learning to fight to overcome domination is difficult but essential political work that requires constant learning.

Freire's emphasis on the importance of dialogue as the basis for critical consciousness, and his stress on the essential role of popular struggle and organisation, both became important tools in grassroots struggles in

Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s. In this period in Latin America in general, and Brazil in particular, popular education became synonymous with popular movements that used it as their main educational strategy, uniting political practice and learning processes.

In 1980, Freire returned to Brazil, where he became active in the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*). When the party took control of São Paulo (one of the largest cities in the world) in 1988, he was appointed as the city's secretary of education. He remained in this position until 1991. He died in 1997.

## Pedagogy of the Oppressed

In 1968, whilst he was in exile in Chile, Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. During that year, youth revolts took place around the world. In France, where the revolt was most intense, many young people began to look at the intellectual work produced in the armed struggles against French colonialism in Vietnam and Algeria—including Fanon's work on the Algerian revolution. This turn to Fanon influenced Freire too. In 1987, Freire recalled that '[a] young man who was in Santiago on a political task gave me the book *The Wretched of the Earth*. I was writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the book was almost finished when I read Fanon. I had to rewrite the book'. Freire was deeply influenced by Fanon's radical humanism, his thinking about the role of university-trained intellectuals in popular struggles, and his warnings about how an elite among the oppressed could become new oppressors.

Freire would write many books in the years to come, but it is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that quickly became and has remained a revolutionary classic. This book has had a powerful impact on popular movements around the world and remains the best introduction to Freire's ideas.

In a talk given in Durban in 1988, Neville Alexander, who was an important radical intellectual in many fields, including education, explained that: '[f]or Freire, the decisive difference between animals and human beings consisted in the ability of the latter to reflect directly on their activity. This ability is, for him, the unique attribute of human consciousness and self-conscious existence and is what makes it possible for people to change their situation'. In other words, for Freire, all people are capable of thought, and critical thought, undertaken collectively, is the basis of organisation and struggle.

Freire argued that oppression dehumanises everyone — both the oppressed *and* the oppressor — and that emancipatory forms of politics — the strivings of the oppressed for freedom and justice — are, ultimately, a demand 'for the affirmation of men and women as persons'. He would write that '[t]his, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well'.

But, for Freire, there is a danger that the person who is oppressed and wants to be free can come to believe that, to be free, she or he must become like the oppressor: 'Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors'.<sup>[1]</sup> Freire believed that political education during a struggle is important in order to help prevent the elites among the oppressed from becoming new oppressors, warning that '[w]hen education is not liberatory, the dream of the oppressed is to be the oppressor'.

For Freire, the point of freedom is to allow everyone to be fully human; the struggle for freedom must end all oppression. It must be for the liberation of everyone, everywhere, and not just for some. But, he said, there are many different reasons why the oppressed do not always see this clearly. Sometimes the oppressed do not see that they are oppressed because they have been taught to believe that the way things are is ‘normal’ or is their fault. For example, they are taught to believe that they are poor because they do not have enough education, or that others are rich because they have worked harder. Sometimes, they are taught to blame something else (such as ‘the economy’) or someone else (such as ‘foreigners’) for their poverty.

True liberation must start by seeing clearly how things really are. For Freire, this is why radical and collective questioning, discussion, and learning are so important. He argued that, by thinking carefully and critically about how things really are (our actual lives and experiences), we can come to see oppression more accurately so that we can fight more effectively to end it.

The political work of encouraging critical thinking about our situation does not mean encouraging people to just criticise everything; it means always going beyond how things seem by constantly asking questions — especially by asking ‘why?’ — to understand the root causes of why things are the way they are, especially things we feel strongly about. Asking questions allows people to draw on their own lived experience and thinking to find their own answers to the question of why they face situations of oppression or injustice. This is very different from traditional education that tries to fill the (apparently empty!) heads of the learners with knowledge that the powerful teacher thinks they need. Freire wrote that ‘[p]rojecting an absolute ignorance onto others [is] a characteristic of the ideology of oppression’. He called the model of education that assumes that the teacher has all the knowledge and the students have none the ‘banking’ concept of education and likened it to a teacher making deposits into an empty bank account. Freire wrote that:

The man or woman who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into communion with the people, whom he or she continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived. The convert who approaches the people but feels alarm at each step they take, each doubt they express, and each suggestion they offer, and attempts to impose his ‘status,’ remains nostalgic towards his origins.

This is very different from many political education programmes organised by NGOs or small sectarian political groups which assume that the oppressed are ignorant and incapable of thought and that they will bring knowledge to the people. Freire argued that ‘[l]eaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organise the people — they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress’.

Freire also realised that people cannot change situations of oppression and injustice on their own. This means that the struggle for liberation must be *collective*. He suggested that what he called an ‘animator’ could help. An ‘animator’ may come from outside the life situation of the poor and oppressed but plays a role that helps to encourage the thinking and the life and strength of the people who are in that situation. An animator does not work to assert their own power over the oppressed. An animator works to create a community of inquiry in which everyone can contribute to developing knowledge, and the democratic power of the oppressed can be built. To do this effectively requires humility and love; it is crucial that an animator enters into the lives and world of the poor and oppressed and, in doing so, enters into a true dialogue as equals.

Freire wrote that:

[T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.

In genuine dialogue, both the animator and the learners from among the oppressed bring something to this process. Through this dialogue, and through careful, collective, and critical reflection on lived experience, both the learners from among the oppressed and the animator come to be ‘conscientised’; in other words, they come to really understand the nature of oppression. But, for Freire, it is no good to just understand the world; ‘[i]t is necessary that the weakness of the powerless is transformed into a force capable of announcing justice’.

This action against oppression must always be tied together with careful thinking (reflection) on action, and what has happened as a result of action. Action and reflection are part of an ongoing cycle of transformation that Freire, following Karl Marx, called ‘praxis’.



Book covers of Pedagogy of the Oppressed in different languages.

## The Importance of Freire's Thought in South Africa

*Paulo Freire was the key theoretician if you like. But we needed to bring Paulo Freire back from Brazil to the South African context. We knew nothing about Brazil of course except what we were reading. I don't know of any similar text that we could have used in South Africa then as a way of understanding and engaging the South African context.*

— Barney Pityana, a leading intellectual in the Black Consciousness Movement

Though Freire visited many countries in Africa, the apartheid state would not have allowed him to visit South Africa. However, he does discuss South Africa in his books and describes how South African anti-apartheid activists came to see him to talk about his work and what it meant in the South African context. Many of the organisations and movements involved in the anti-apartheid struggle used Freire's thinking and methods.

## The Black Consciousness Movement

Although the apartheid state banned *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, underground copies circulated. By the early 1970s, Freire's work was already being used within South Africa. Leslie Hadfield, an academic who has written about the use of Freire's work by the Black Consciousness Movement, argues that the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* first arrived in South Africa in the early 1970s via the University Christian Movement (UCM), which began to run Freire-inspired literacy projects. The UCM worked closely with the South African Students' Organisation (Saso), which was founded in 1968 by Steve Biko, along with other figures like Barney Pityana and Aubrey Mokoape. Saso was the first of a series of organisations that, together, made up the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM).

Anne Hope, a Christian radical from Johannesburg and a member of the Grail, a Christian women's organisation committed to 'a world transformed in love and justice', met Freire at Harvard University in Boston in 1969, and then again in Tanzania. After she returned to South Africa in 1971, Biko asked her to work with the Saso leadership for six months on Freire's participatory methods. Biko and fourteen other activists were trained in Freirean methods in monthly workshops. Bennie Khoapa, a significant figure in the BCM, recalled that 'Paulo Freire ... made a lasting philosophical impression on Steve Biko'.

Between these workshops, the activists went out to do community-based research as part of a process of conscientisation. Barney Pityana remembers that:

Anne Hope would run what essentially was literacy training, but it was literacy training of a different

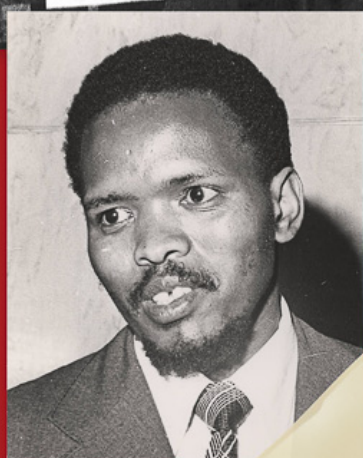
kind because it was Paulo Freirean literacy training that was really taking human experience into the way of understanding concepts. It was drawing from everyday experience and understanding: what impacts it makes in the mind, the learning and understanding that they had.

For some of us, I suspect it was the first time that we came across Paulo Freire; for me it certainly was, but Steve, Steve Biko was a very diverse reading person, lots of things that Steve knew, we didn't know. And so, in his reading he came across Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and began to apply it in his explanation of the oppressive system in South Africa.

Echoing Freire's argument that it is only the oppressed who can liberate everyone, the BCM emphasised the importance of black people leading the struggle against apartheid. Freire had also stressed that, '[w]ithout a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle'. This, too, resonated with the BCM, which affirmed a proud and strong black identity against white supremacy.

The movement drew directly on Freire as it developed a constant process of critical reflection, part of an ongoing project of conscientisation. Aubrey Mokoape, who had a background in the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and became an older mentor to the students who founded Saso, explains that the link between Black Consciousness and 'conscientisation' is clear:

The only way to overthrow this government is to get the mass of our people understanding what we want to do and owning the process, in other words, becoming conscious of their position in society, in other words ... joining the dots, understanding that if you don't have money to pay ... for your child's school fees, fees at medical school, you do not have adequate housing, you have poor transport, how those things all form a single continuum; that all those things are actually connected. They are embedded in the system, that your position in society is not isolated but it is systemic.



**Steve Biko (standing) and Ruben Phillip (far right) at a 1971 conference of the South African Students' Organisation (Saso) in Durban.**

Steve Biko Foundation

**Steve Biko**

Fraser MacLean / Historical Papers Research Archive University of the Witwatersrand

## The Church

In 1972, Biko and Bokwe Mafuna (who had been part of the training in Freirean methods) were employed as field officers by Bennie Khoapa. Khoapa was the head of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Christian Institute's Black Community Projects (BCP) and had also been trained in Freirean methods. The BCP's work was heavily influenced by Freire. Both the BCM and the Christian Churches in South Africa drew on liberation theology, a school of radical thought which Freire had both been influenced by and contributed to. Ruben Phillip, who was elected as deputy president of Saso in 1972, and went on to become an Anglican archbishop, explains that:

Paulo Freire is considered one of the founders of liberation theology. He was a Christian who lived his faith in a liberating way. Paulo placed the poor and oppressed at the centre of his method, which is important in the concept of the preferential option for the poor, a trademark of liberation theology.

In South Africa, ideas drawn from liberation theology were — together with the black liberation theology developed by James H. Cone in the United States — a powerful influence on various currents of struggle. Bishop Ruben recalls that:

The one thing I took away from our conversation was a need to be critical thinkers. ... Liberation theologians allude that theology, like education, should be for liberation, not domestication. Religion made us subservient, has made us lazy to use our critical faculty and connect knowledge to our everyday reality. So, education for him is about .... a critical way of life and about connecting knowledge to how we live.

## The Workers' Movement

The Black Consciousness Movement included workers' organisations like the Black Workers' Project, a joint project between the BCP and Saso. The workers' movement was also influenced by Freirean ideas through worker education projects that started in the 1970s. One of these was the Urban Training Programme (UTP), which used the Young Christian Workers' See-Judge-Act methodology, which had influenced Freire's own thinking and methodology. The UTP used this method to encourage workers to reflect on their everyday experiences, think about what they could do about their situation, and then act to change the world. Other worker education projects were started by left students in and around the National Union of South African Students (Nusas). Saso had split from Nusas in 1968 but, although largely white, Nusas was a consciously anti-apartheid organisation that was also influenced by Freire, primarily through members who were also part of the UCM.

During the 1970s, Wages Commissions were set up at the University of Natal, the University of the Witwatersrand, and the University of Cape Town. Using the resources of the universities and some progressive unions, the Commissions helped to set up structures that led to the formation of the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau (WPWAB) in Cape Town, the General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund (GFWBF) in Durban, and the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) in Johannesburg. A number of left students supported these initiatives, as did some older trade unionists, such as Harriet Bolton in Durban. In Durban,

Rick Turner, a radical academic whose teaching style was influenced by Freire, became an influential figure among a number of students. Turner was committed to a future rooted in participatory democracy and many of his students became committed activists.

David Hemson, a participant in this milieu, explains that:

Two particular minds were at work, one [Turner] in a wood and iron house in Bellair; and another [Biko] in the shadow of the reeking, rumbling Wentworth oil refinery in the Alan Taylor residence. Both would become close friends and both would die at the hands of the apartheid security apparatus after bursts of energetic writing and political engagement. Both were influenced by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and these ideas and concepts infused and were woven into their writings striving for freedom.

Omar Badsha was one of the students who was close to Turner and participated in setting up the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE). He recalls that:

Rick Turner was very interested in education, and like any intellectual we began reading, and one of the texts we read was Paulo Freire's book that had just come out not so long ago at the time. And this book resonated with us in the sense that here were some valuable ideas about teaching and an affirmative way of teaching – taking into account the audience and how to relate with the audience.

In January 1973, workers across Durban went on strike, an event that is now seen as a major turning point in worker organisation and resistance to apartheid. Hemson recalls that:

Out of the dawn they streamed, from the barrack-like hostels of Coronation Bricks, the expansive textile mills of Pinetown, the municipal compounds, great factories, mills and plants and the lesser Five Roses tea processing plant. The downtrodden and exploited rose to their feet and hammered the bosses and their regime. Only in the group, the assembled pickets, the leaderless mass meetings of strikers, the gatherings of locked out workers did the individual expression have confidence. The solid order of apartheid cracked and new freedoms were born. New concepts took human form: the weaver became the shop steward, a mass organised overtook the unorganised, the textile trainer a dedicated trade unionist, the shy older man a reborn Congress veteran, a sweeper a defined general worker.



**Clover's main factory at Congella (Durban) was crippled when its 500 African employees went on strike for higher wages. 7 February 1973, Clover Dairy, Durban.**

Mike Duff / Source Sunday Times

## After the Durban Moment

The period in Durban before and during the 1973 strikes came to be known as the Durban Moment. With Biko and Turner as its two charismatic figures, this was a time of important political creativity that laid the foundations for much of the struggle to come.

But in March 1973, the state banned Biko and Turner, along with several BCM and Nusas leaders, including Rubin Phillip. Despite this, as unions were formed in the wake of the strikes, a number of university-trained intellectuals, often influenced by Freire, began working in and with the unions, which made rapid advances. In 1976, the Soweto revolt, which was directly influenced by Black Consciousness, opened a new chapter in the struggle and shifted the centre of contestation to Johannesburg.

Biko was murdered in police custody in 1977, after which the Black Consciousness organisations were banned. In the following year, Turner was assassinated.

In 1979, a number of unions were united into the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), which was — in the spirit of the Durban Moment — strongly committed to democratic workers’ control in unions and on the shop floor, as well as the political empowerment of shop stewards.

In 1983, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in Cape Town. It united community-based organisations across the country with a commitment to bottom-up democratic praxis in the present and a vision of a radically democratic future after apartheid. By the mid 1980s, millions of people were mobilised through the UDF and the trade union movement, which became federated through the ANC-aligned Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) in 1985.

Throughout this period, Freirean ideas absorbed and developed in the Durban Moment were often central to thinking about political education and praxis. Anne Hope and Sally Timmel wrote *Training for Transformation*, a three-volume workbook that aimed to apply Freire’s methods for developing radical praxis in the context of emancipatory struggles in Southern Africa. The first volume was published in Zimbabwe in 1984. It was swiftly banned in South Africa but was widely circulated underground. *Training for Transformation* was used in political education work in both the trade union movement and the community-based struggles that were linked together through the UDF.

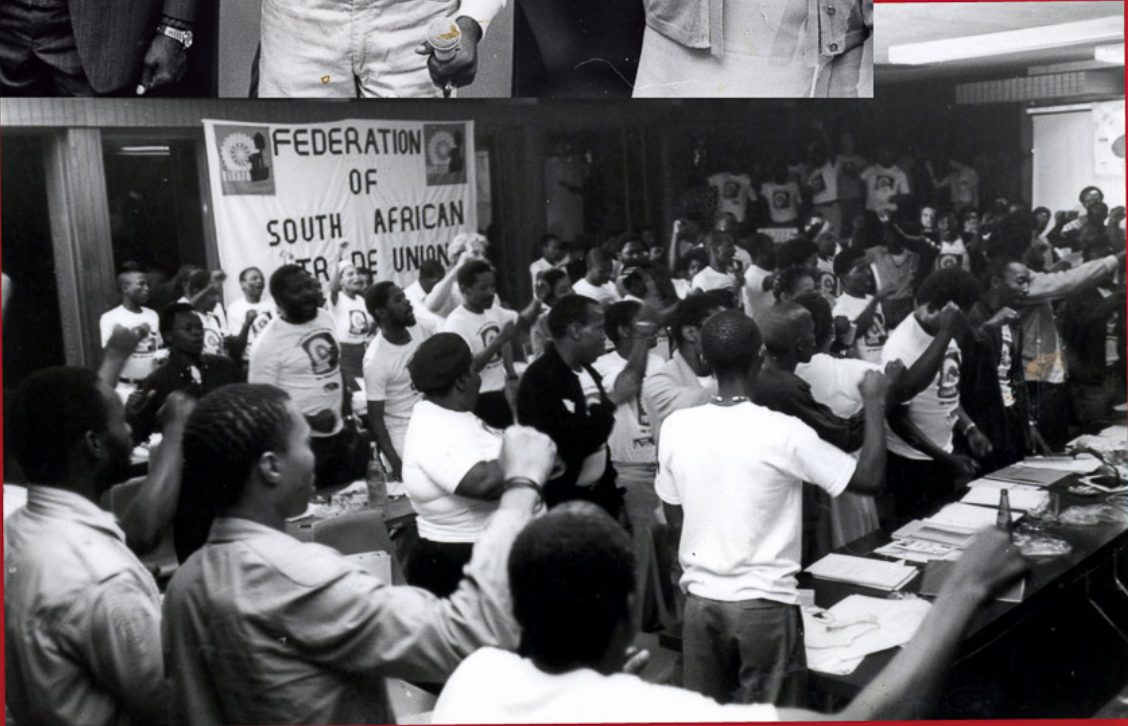
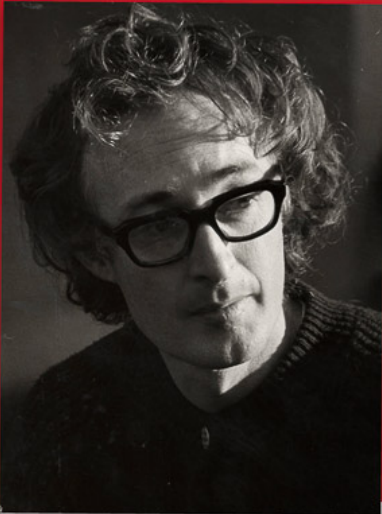
Salim Vally, an activist and academic, recalls that ‘literacy groups of the 80s, some pre-school groups, worker education and people’s education movements were deeply influenced by Freire’. The South African Committee for Higher Education (Sached) also came to be strongly influenced by Freire. The Committee, first formed in 1959 in opposition to the apartheid state’s enforcement of segregation at universities, provided educational support to trade unions and community-based movements in the 1980s. Vally notes that ‘Neville Alexander always discussed Freire in Sached — he was the Cape Town director — and in other education circles he was involved in. John Samuels — the national director of Sached — met Freire in Geneva’.

From 1986, the idea of ‘people’s power’ became very important in popular struggles, but practices and understandings of what this meant varied widely. Some saw the people as a battering ram clearing the way for the ANC to return from exile and the underground and take power over society. Others thought that building democratic practices and structures in trade unions and community organisations marked the beginning of the work required to build a post-apartheid future in which participatory democracy would be deeply entrenched in ordinary life — in workplaces, communities, schools, universities, etc. This was what was meant by the trade union slogan ‘building tomorrow today’.

Though there were strong Freirean currents in this period, they were significantly weakened by the militarisation of politics in the late 1980s, and more so when the ban on the ANC was lifted in 1990. The return of the ANC from exile and the underground led to a deliberate demobilisation of community-based struggles and the direct subordination of the trade union movement to the authority of the ANC. The situation was not unlike that described by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

Today, the party’s mission is to deliver to the people the instructions which issue from the summit. There no longer exists the fruitful give-and-take from the bottom to the top and from the top to the bottom which creates and guarantees democracy in a party. Quite on the contrary, the party has made

itself into a screen between the masses and the leaders.



**Rick Turner, undated.**

Helen Joseph Collection of the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

**(Left to right) Henry Fazzie, Murphy Morobe, and Albertina Sisulu at Khotso House, the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the United Democratic Front (UDF). Johannesburg, South Africa, undated.**

Joe Sefale / Gallo Images

**Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) meeting, undated.**

Wits Historical Papers

## Paulo Freire Today

Freirean ideas continued to thrive after apartheid in some of the fissures of the new order. For instance, in the early years of the democratic dispensation, the Workers' College in Durban, a trade union education project, included some teachers who were committed to Freirean methods. Mabogo More, a philosopher with a background in the Black Consciousness Movement, was one of these teachers. He recalls that he first came to know about Freire as a student at The University of the North (also known as 'Turffloep') in the 1970s 'through Saso's concept of "conscientisation" used during formation winter schools organised by Saso. Later, S'bu Ndebele, a Turffloep librarian at the time, smuggled a copy of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which, together with Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, we surreptitiously read among ourselves as conscientised students'.

In 1994, More was able to attend a lecture by Freire at Harvard University in the United States. He says that 'Freire's lecture was fascinating and helped in modelling my teaching practice in line with the precepts articulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*'.

Today, a number of organisations remain committed to Freirean methods, such as the Umtapo Centre in Durban. The Centre was started in Durban in 1986 as a response to the rise of political violence within black communities. It has roots in the Black Consciousness Movement and its work is explicitly based on Freire's methodology.

Another organisation that uses Freire's ideas is the Church Land Programme (CLP) in Pietermaritzburg, which has its roots in the liberation theology tradition and is closely linked to Bishop Rubin, Abahlali baseMjondolo, and a number of other grassroots organisations and struggles. CLP was established in 1996 in response to the land reform process taking place in South Africa and became an independent organisation in 1997. By the early 2000s, CLP realised that the struggle against apartheid had not led to an end to oppression, that the state's land reform programme was not taking an emancipatory direction, and that its own work was not helping to end oppression. Therefore, CLP decided to incorporate Freire's idea of animation and enter into solidarity with new struggles.

Zodwa Nsibande, an animator with CLP, says that:

In our engagements, we let people think because we do not want to take their agency. We ask probing questions to get people to think about their lived experiences. We embrace Paulo Freire's thinking

when he said that ‘problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming’. When we engage with communities using problem-posing methodologies, we seek to give them their power. *Sibabuyisele isithunzi sabo, ngoba sikhokwa ukuthi ngenkathi umcinezeli ecinezela ususa isithunzi somcinezela. Thina sibuyisela isithunzi somcinezela esisuswa yisihluku sokucinezela* [We restore their dignity, for we believe that when the oppressor oppresses, he takes the dignity of the oppressed. We restore the dignity of the oppressed that is taken by the cruelty of oppression].

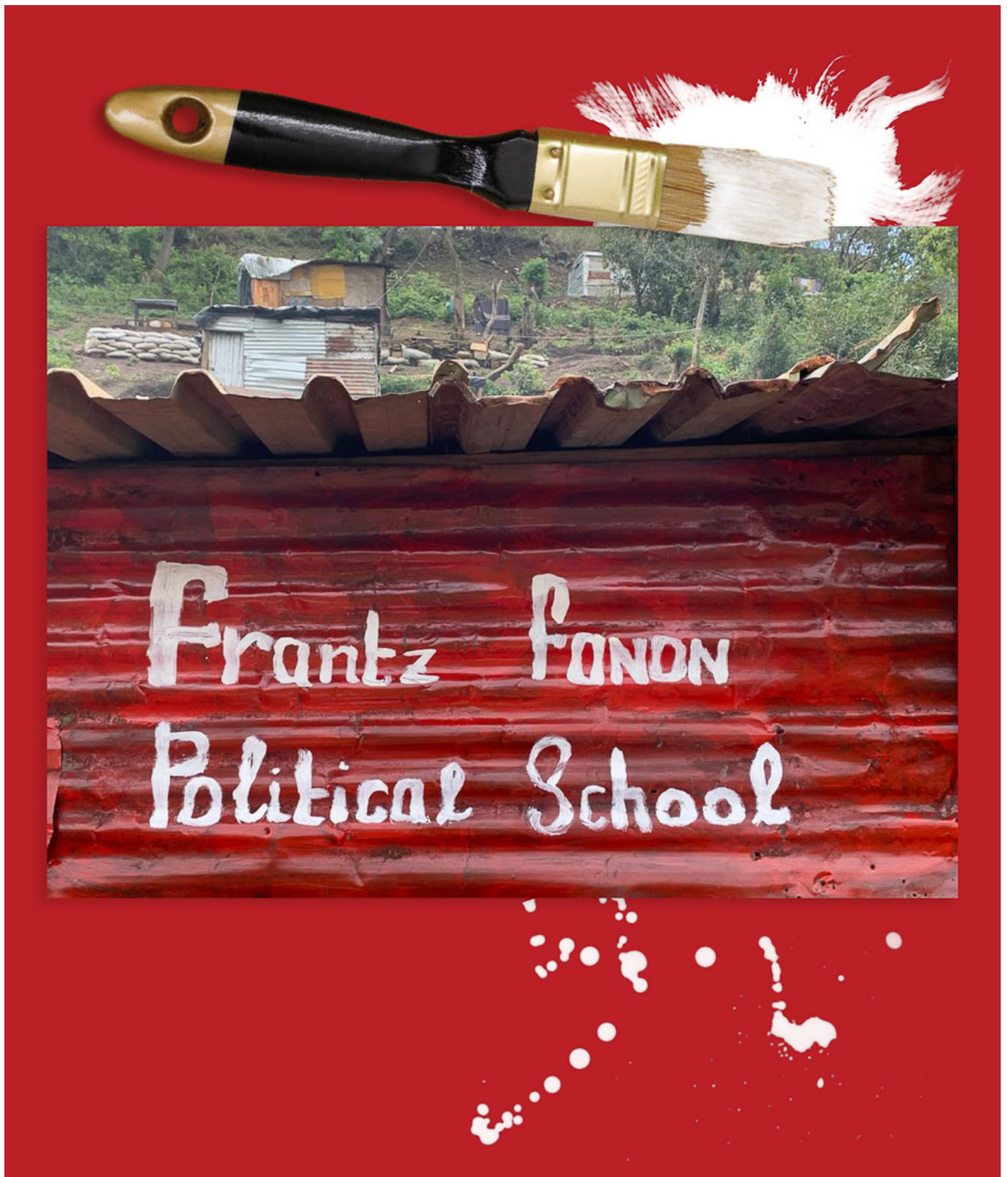
In recent years, connections to the Landless Workers’ Movement, or the *Movimento Sem Terra* (MST), in Brazil have reenergised the potency of Freire’s ideas in South Africa. Formed in 1984, the MST has mobilised millions of people and organised thousands of occupations of unproductive land. The organisation has built close relationships with the National Union of Metalworkers in South Africa (Numsa), the largest trade union in South Africa, and with Abahlali baseMjondolo, the country’s largest popular movement. This has meant that a number of activists from Numsa and Abahlali baseMjondolo have been able to participate in the programmes at the Florestan Fernandes National School (ENFF), the MST’s political education school.

There are direct connections between activists’ experiences at the ENFF and the establishment of political schools in South Africa, such as The Frantz Fanon Political School built and managed by Abahlali baseMjondolo on the eKhenana Land Occupation in Durban.

Vuyolwethu Toli, who is the Numsa JC Bez Regional Education Officer, explains that:

The schooling systems in South Africa and throughout the world use the banking method of education where there aren’t reciprocal or mutual learning processes. The teacher, or whoever is facilitating, positions themselves as the dominant knowledge disseminator where they see themselves as having a monopoly of wisdom. As comrades responsible for popular education in the trade union, we do not operate like this. We make sure there is collective knowledge production and that all sessions are informed by workers’ lived experiences. Our point of departure is that worker knowledge informs the content and not the other way around. We don’t believe in the banking method of education.

Freire’s ideas, first generated in Brazil, have influenced struggles all over the world. Almost fifty years after they began to influence intellectuals and movements in South Africa, they remain relevant and powerful. The work of conscientisation is a permanent commitment, a way of life. As Aubrey Mokoape said, ‘[c]onsciousness has no end. And consciousness has no real beginning’.



The Frantz Fanon Political School at the eKhenana Land Occupation of Abahlali baseMjondolo, Cato Manor, Durban, South Africa. 14 October 2020.

Richard Pithouse

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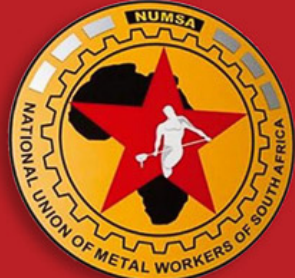
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The flags of the MST and Abahlali baseMjondolo photographed at the celebration of the movement's fifteenth anniversary. eKhenanan occupation, Durban, South Africa, 4 October 2020.

Landh Tshazi / Abahlali baseMjondolo

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[1] In reading Freire's writings and his use of gendered language such as 'men' to mean 'human', which was still common in the late 1960s, we must undertake the intellectual exercise of entering into dialogue with his gendered forms of expression with the aim of critical reflection and developing emancipatory alternatives.