

MESSAGE FROM WALTER SISULU TO NATIONAL EDUCATION  
CRISIS COMMITTEE

15 DECEMBER 1989

I salute you in reaching another milestone in your stormy existence. I greet you all at a time when we are experiencing the most serious crisis in the history of education in our country. Whilst in prison, we learnt of the sterling work you were doing on the education front. The fact that you were able to continue your work during a period of repression is admirable.

I would have loved to attend your conference but regret that I am unable to do so. The NEEC is a very important organisation and the struggle on the education front is absolutely crucial.

Your conference comes at a very critical time in the history of our struggle. Ever since union, black people - who form the vast majority of the population - have been denied equal or proper education. In terms of everything - resources, money, facilities and opportunities - whites have always been placed in a highly privileged position so that they could occupy the highest position in our society. Blacks were meant to be the drawers of water and the hewers of wood.

With the passing of the Bantu Education Act in 1953 and other anti-educational laws, education was plunged into even greater crisis. This crisis has increased. Today in one country we have over a dozen educational systems. The education structure is in a virtual state of collapse. The DET is in a mess. Is the position under the House of Representatives and House of Delegates any better? I doubt it. What however is evident is that corruption is the order of the day. The crisis which pervades all aspects of South African society is reflected in education also. What is the result? Thousands and thousands of black children roam the streets. Schools are in such a chaotic state that our young people are unable to pursue meaningful studies. What is more, there is no incentive to study. Even if they do go to school,

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what do they do after matriculating? There are no jobs and there is no future! That is the present fate of our young people.

The NECC was formed to intervene in this crisis. Our people and their leaders knew the value of education. Our people are hungry - not only for food - but also for education. We want our children to be at school. We want <sup>them</sup> to learn. We want them to equip themselves. We want them to qualify as doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, as teachers, etc. We want them to acquire all the skills necessary in a modern technological society. This is necessary not only for today - but also to ensure that the South Africa of tomorrow, a free South Africa, a non-racial South Africa, will have at its disposal free citizens who will contribute to the re-construction and transformation of our country in the interests of the population as a whole.

When the NECC was formed, it organised parents, teachers, students, and all those involved in education - to ensure that our children are able to return to school so as to obtain some education. But the government - as intransigent as ever - fail to appreciate the important role that the NECC could play to normalise education. Instead of seeking an understanding and co-operation with the NECC, the government - for its own political purposes - acted high-handedly and restricted the organisation. Scores of people involved in the NECC were detained. How foolish of government to try to break the NECC! However, this high-handed action has not solved the problem. How can it? Instead the problem has got worse.

It is quite clear to all that the apartheid system is the major cause of the problems presently besetting <sup>us</sup> on the education front. It is also quite clear that for a democratic system of education to become a reality, the apartheid system will have to go. A democratic educational system is only possible in a democratic South Africa. It is also clear that we need to commit ourselves to bring about this basic transformation of our society to make possible the introduction of a democratic educational system for

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all the citizens of our country.

But the problem does not end there! We cannot leave the question of educating our young to the day when the apartheid system is ended. What must our children do today? Must they forget about education until liberation comes? Does rejecting the status quo and the present system of education mean that we must not make use of existing educational opportunities - limited though they may be? When I observe the situation, I get the impression that many of our students and youth in general are of the view that if they reject the present system of education, then it means that they must bring the whole school system to a standstill. They seem to think that because the educational system is rotten, we need not attend school or pay any attention to present day studies. I am not criticising the role that our youth have played and are playing in the liberation struggle. I salute their contribution for they have played a major role in transforming the situation but I am criticising this negative attitude with regard to education. It is suicidal for our young people to abandon their studies today - no matter how meagre the opportunities and how distorted the system. We must find the right formula! On the one hand our young people must - as they have done - continue to participate in the struggle for liberation. But at the same time it is also very important that we learn to read and write, that we equip ourselves, that we acquire all the skills and knowledge possible no matter what the handicaps. We need to do this - not only for today - but for the South Africa of tomorrow. How are we going to uplift our people on the basis of ignorance? How are we going to make sure that a post-apartheid South Africa will have capable people to run the country, to run the mines, the factories, the farms and all the administrative organs necessary in the modern technological society? Have we not learnt from the experience of countries such as Mozambique who became totally dependent on foreigners to run the country and the economy? In our endeavour to transform our country, are we going to be held hostage by those who have the skills but are not committed to a liberated South Africa? We cannot allow our country to be held to ransom by privileged groups.

Therefore / .....

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Therefore comrades, no matter what the difficulties, no matter how bad the school system may be, move forward and whilst fighting for liberation, make sure that our children attend schools and universities, colleges and technikons etc to equip themselves. The liberation movement needs people with education and skills. The future democratic South Africa also needs such people.

This is the challenge which faces you of the NECC as you assemble to discuss the education crisis in our country. I have no doubt that you will rise to the occasion and give our country a lead.

Finally, because the NECC is part of the Mass Democratic Movement, it must involve parents, teachers and students in the struggle to which I have referred. That means that the NECC must operate democratically and must be accountable. The structures created by the NECC must reflect this democracy and accountability. Only in this way will we be able to meet the challenges of today. I once again convey my very good wishes to your conference and trust that it will be successful in every respect.

  
SAHA