

'LET US CRY FOR OUR CHILDREN': lessons of the 1955-6 school boycotts

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INTRODUCTION

In 1955 the ANC responded to the introduction of Bantu Education by launching a school boycott. This boycott has increasingly become a reference point for those involved in current struggles against the state's education policy. This is all the more so since the 1955 boycott embraced an attempt to establish an alternative education system, a venture which can be seen as a forerunner of present day calls for 'People's Education' (Mkatshwa, 1986). The 1955 movement is discussed here in the light of today's conflicts over education, in order to examine, on the one hand what the experience of the 1950s may tell us about the dynamics of educational existence and the establishment of alternative educational systems, and on the other hand to ask what differentiates the situation of the 1950s from that of today. The experience of the 1955-6 boycotts, and their ultimate failure to prevent the imposition of Bantu Education, has implications for our understanding of the contemporary conflicts over education. At the same time the contrasts between the two periods help to highlight the dramatic social changes affecting the education struggle.

Both the 1950s boycott and the 1986 People's Education movement generated unrealistic popular expectations about the possibility of People's Education becoming an institutional reality outside the schools. In the case of the earlier struggle, these expectations resulted largely from ambiguities on the part of the campaign's leadership as to what they could hope to achieve through the setting up of alternative educational facilities. While the leaders of the 1986 movement were fairly clear on the limitations of their ability to provide an alternative to the state's educational system, expectations tended to be fuelled by the high levels of militancy, especially amongst the youth. The hope that a 'People's Education' network operating outside the school system could be established was not a realistic one on either occasion. In the 1950s, such a hope rested on the belief that such institutions could be sustained over a long period, until major political change took place. In 1986 it rested on the belief that the collapse of the state was imminent. Experience showed both of these beliefs to be incorrect.

Questions of material infrastructure proved crucial in both the 1950s and the 1980s: in neither case did the popular movement have the organisa-

tional resources, bureaucratic apparatus and financial means necessary to their educational project. Nor could they solve the problem that present day students are tomorrow's workers who face a labour market based on official, state-system credentialing. This inevitably creates demand amongst youth for the credentials available from formal schooling. Both movements thus faced a split between die-hard supporters of boycott and those whose fears for their future position in the labour market drew them back into the school system. Although these pressures for formal schooling were more noticeably coming from parents in the 1950s than in the 1980s, reflecting a shift in power relations within the family, they did affect both students and parents in both periods.

The events of 1955-6 demonstrate the impossibility of building an 'alternative, mass education system of an institutional type in the face of a state which is capable of subduing opposition. In the light of this, the 1986 decision of the People's Education movement that students should return to school and that a struggle should be waged there to transform education should be seen as a wise one. It will be a very long haul to a non-racial society. Indefinite boycotts will generate enormous conflicts within the popular movement and lead - as they have partly already done - to political exhaustion. People's Education cannot provide institutional alternatives totally outside the state. What is realistic for the foreseeable future is the strategy which aims to challenge specific policies and features of the existing education order from inside.

In exploring the significance of the 1956 boycotts, three key issues will be investigated. Firstly, what was the relationship between youth, political movements and the educational struggle in the 1950s? Secondly, what did the struggle led by the African Education Movement (AEM) to set up alternative education systems achieve? And thirdly, why did the AEM and the boycott eventually fail, and what are the lessons of their failure?

THE YOUTH OF THE 1950S

A detailed history of the 1955 boycotts has already been very adequately undertaken by Lodge (1983; 1983a; 1984) and less satisfactorily by Feit (1967). Although my intentions are of a more analytical kind, nevertheless, it may be useful briefly to recapitulate the events of the boycott in order to introduce the subject.

The Bantu Education Act was passed in 1953, and was aimed at bringing black education, previously missionary dominated and regulated by the state at provincial level, under direct central state control, in a strictly segregated system informed by the values of Afrikaner Nationalist ideology. This development has to be understood as part of the state's drive to

restructure the social reproduction of the urban black working class, in response to the social and political crisis which had developed during the 1940s and 1950s (Hyslop, 1987). The ANC was initially slow to respond to the government's moves in this area. However, at an ANC conference in Durban in December 1954, a decision was taken to launch an indefinite boycott of primary schools beginning on 1 April 1955.

In March, because of the lack of membership response, the National Executive Committee (NEC) decided to postpone the boycott of schools and instead to concentrate on a boycott of school boards and school committees. But in the Transvaal there was considerable pressure from members and local leaders for the school boycott to go ahead. As a result a new conference to consider the issue was held at Port Elizabeth on 9-10 April; the principle of an indefinite boycott was supported. It was decided that the date for the national implementation of the boycott would be left to the NEC, but that local boycotts could begin earlier with the NEC's permission. On 12 April a boycott was launched on the East Rand, spreading to those townships nearer central Johannesburg. From 23 April boycotts took place in the Eastern Cape. Thousands of school pupils participated; but the boycotts did not spread significantly beyond these two regions.

On 23 May, the AEM was established at a conference in Johannesburg. It was constituted as a campaigning structure which could draw support beyond the ranks of the ANC itself, although in fact the AEM activists were almost all affiliated to the ANC or other Congress movement organizations, and its programmes were based on Congress movement ideology. The AEM then set about creating and servicing 'Cultural Clubs' - alternative educational facilities for school students. The Cultural Clubs sustained vigorous activity well into 1950. But outside of a few areas of particular militancy, the vast bulk of the black school-going population stayed inside the school system. Gradually support for the boycott eroded, and by late 1956 the ANC decided to abandon the strategy (Lodge, 1983; 1983a; 1984).

Since the mid-1970s youth has played a central part in political struggles in South Africa to an extent which can have few historical precedents. It thus comes as something of a shock to realise, when one turns to examine youth politics in the 1950s, that the urban youth of that period seem to have been relatively unpoliticized, and proved difficult for the ANC to organise. This is partly the result of organizational problems on the side of the ANC, but was mainly due to the structural position of urban youth in the 1950s. This made them far less open to politicization than their counterparts of the 1970s and 1980s. Social and particularly educational changes help to explain why the boycotts of the 1950s proved far less explosive than those which came later, and why they were more clearly and abruptly

brought to an end.

From the early 1950s, the ANC made efforts to recruit substantial numbers of young people (Giffard, 1984). However, it faced an important organizational difficulty. Its youth wing, the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), had emerged in the 1940s as, essentially, an intellectual ginger group of young leaders, who were trying to challenge the policy of the ANC in a more militant direction. The ANCYL thus entered the 1950s as an organisation ill-adapted to attracting young people to its ranks. As a Congress document of the early 1950s put it, the ANCYL

consists mainly of intellectuals who feel they must watch over the policy of the ANC and no attempt is made to organise sections of young African workers, scholars or peasants.¹

Consequently, a situation prevailed where, as a Youth League publication admitted, the ANCYL 'has but scratched the surface in its efforts to create a genuine Mass Youth Movement in this country'.² The geographical base of the Youth League was limited to those areas where the ANC had very strong support. At its 1954 Conference there were only delegates from the Cape and Transvaal, with no representation at all of Natal or the Orange Free State. Moreover, details of the ANCYL's Transvaal conference in 1955 show that its organisational structures were basically confined to the Rand.⁴

In order to try and overcome this situation, the ANC leadership began from the early 1950s to direct the ANCYL toward changing itself into a more substantial organisation. In 1953 Robert Resha, the ANCYL's Transvaal leader called for Youth Leaguers to establish Congress and YL branches throughout the Transvaal.⁵ Walter Sisulu, the ANC's Secretary General, subsequently called on the Youth to make 1954 a year of 'Mass Youth Action against Fascism'.⁶ Duma Nokwe, the ANCYL's Assistant National Secretary, advanced a policy of creating a 'Mass Youth League' through the holding of 'Mass Youth Conferences'. The ANCYL's 1954 conference resolved to strengthen its activity and organisation so as to fulfil its 'historic task of rallying the masses of South African Youth'. This direction toward the building of a mass youth organisation was continued into the period of the boycott.⁹

Some quite vigorous attempts were made by Youth League members to implement these policies in the period 1954-5. They embarked on a drive to convene mass meetings of youth at some of which new ANCYL branches were formed.¹⁰ By 1955, the Transvaal ANCYL were able to claim at least six new branches on the Rand, and one in Klerksdorp.¹¹ The ANCYL showed a much greater involvement in practical political campaigns than before - for

example playing a prominent role in resisting removals in Sophiatown/Western Native Townships and in Germiston.¹² In particular it was of course logical that the Youth League should play an important part in the education boycott campaign. A plan was drawn up by a Youth League working group which spelled out their tasks. Students' committees were to be formed at all levels to organise students, and special organisations for students were to be revived or set up; mass meetings were to be held and bulletins on Bantu education were to be distributed; Youth Leaguers were to make contacts with parents and teachers. The Youth League was to be involved in the establishment of the broadly-based Anti-Bantu Education Committees which were to co-ordinate the boycott in each area.¹³ To some extent these plans were implemented: for example, on the Rand there was considerable activity by the Western Areas, Germiston, Natalspruit, Benoni, Brakpan and Alexandra ANCYL branches in the anti-Bantu Education campaign.¹⁴

However these attempts to organise youth politically on a mass scale were, generally, extremely unsuccessful. At the ANC conference at the end of 1955, the year which had seen the school boycott at the height of its strength, the National Executive commented that the ANCYL had failed to become a mass movement of the youth, and that its relation with the ANC was far from satisfactory.¹⁵ The Transvaal Youth League's report for 1955 explains that despite the establishment of some new branches, some of the established branches had begun deteriorating and had collapsed. Although most branches had recruited members, most had also lost members.¹⁶ By 1956 the ANCYL seems to have been at extremely low ebb.¹⁷ Youth League leader T Makiwane commented that the Youth League's work in the Transvaal was 'at a virtual standstill'.¹⁸ By 1956 the ANCYL were once again reconsidering the problem which had originally faced them - the creation of a mass youth movement.¹⁹

To some extent these difficulties arose from the organisational structures and style of the ANCYL, which found it difficult to break away from being an organisation aimed at an older and more intellectual constituency. A 1954 ANCYL publication²⁰ urges readers 'have you enrolled your son/daughter in the Youth League', thus suggesting something of an inability to address young people directly. Similarly, a 1956 edition of the same journal identified 19 to 36 year olds as the target group for ANCYL recruitment,²¹ showing a lack of interest in recruiting teenagers which was clearly incompatible with the aim of a 'mass youth organisation'. This emphasis is particularly strange when one remembers that the school boycott was directed at primary schools;²² those who aimed their recruitment efforts at people in their twenties must have missed opportunities opened up by the boycott. (In this regard it should be mentioned that, due to the highly

inadequate and interrupted nature of black schooling, primary schools included many pupils in their mid-teens. One should therefore not assume that pupils were 'too young' to be politicized, or visualize the boycotts as including only sub-teenagers.)

The ANCYL was also handicapped by a number of more technical organisational considerations. Its members were frequently used by the ANC 'mother body' as foot soldiers in its campaigns and thus were forced to neglect building up the Youth League. There was a lack of infrastructure: the Transvaal Youth League for example had not one full time official. A frequent leadership complaint was that the Youth League was unable to organise cultural activities to attract young supporters.

The work of the ANCYL seems to have been disrupted by the long factional battle between the Congress leadership and the Africanist grouping. This battle centred on the Transvaal where the Orlando Youth League branch under Potlake Leballo was the Africanist's stronghold. The oppositionists were particularly opposed to the ANC's Congress of the People initiative, and highly critical of the education boycott.

To some extent then the problems experienced by the ANCYL related to its own internal difficulties. But it would be unfair and inaccurate to identify these as the main cause of its inability to evoke a mass response from urban black youth during the 1950s. The fact is that the level of mass politicization of youth was negligible. The contrast with the 1970s and 1980s with their massive eruptions of both semi-spontaneous and organised student movements could not be sharper. The ANCYL faced a potential constituency who were far less easy to mobilize than that facing student militants in the post-1976 era. As an ANCYL journal put it in 1955, 'many of our young people still believe that they are not interested in politics'. In similar vein the ANCYL's Sophiatown branch executive warned in its 1956 report against the danger of directing the League's efforts at the 'mighty few politically serious youth'. The Sophiatown Youth Leaguers clearly found that the majority of young people had interests quite distinct from theirs: 'We can strengthen [the branch] by catering for the ordinary sporting and social youth. By having interests in their activities. They in turn will have interest and confidence in the ANCYL movement'. The 1950s saw an almost total absence of spontaneous acts of rebellion by urban working class black youth - such actions being largely confined to mainly rural boarding schools (Hyslop, 1987a).

CONTRASTS

What explains the contrasts between the political volatility of urban black youth over the last decade, and the unenthusiastic response of youth

to the political activists of the 1950s? In the present state of our knowledge it is not possible to answer this question. However, some cautious hypotheses may be put forward. Firstly, a change in authority relations within urban black families has taken place since the 1950s which has undermined parental authority. This has created a situation in which self-organised political activity on the part of youth has become much easier because parental attempts at control can easily be defied or ignored. This certainly causes conflict within families from which both parents and children suffer. Nevertheless, it seems clear that large numbers of parents cannot restrain their children from engaging in political activity of which they may disapprove.

By contrast, the 1955 boycott was a purely adult-controlled action. The ANC did not appeal to the school students to boycott the schools, but rather to the parents to withdraw their children from the schools.³⁰ Posing the issue in this way was in the circumstances appropriate - there was no sign of autonomous school student activity. Parental authority was still intact and it was only through parents that most young people could be drawn into the boycott. Nor is there any evidence that students' participation in the boycott undermined the power of the parents. There was no evidence of clashes of opinion of any substantial scale between students and parents. It thus seems that between the 1950s and the 1970s there was a shift in authority relations within the family, which is as yet unexplained, but which must be central to an understanding of post-1976 student movements.

Secondly, the inadequacy of state provision for the reproduction of the working class in the fifties - whether in education, housing or mechanisms of social control - resulted in a situation where urban youth was to a very significant extent 'lumpenised'. The absence of an effective school system, the lack of employment prospects, the existence of an extensive street gang subculture and the relatively recent formation of a permanently urbanised proletariat, all militated toward a situation where youth tended to seek individual, and often criminal, rather than collective and political, solutions. Don Mattera, himself a member of a Sophiatown gang, captures very clearly the way in which the lumpenisation of urban youth made it difficult for the ANC to organise them:

But at this time there were more Tsotsis and gangsters than people at work. So there was this social problem. So the politician could not organise successfully because he was being hampered by the social disorder (Mattera, 1986).

Thirdly, Bantu Education, by drawing the mass of urban youth into a common, oppressive educational structure, provided a shared basis of experience which unified urban youth into a relatively cohesive social force. The township youth of the 1950s were patchily reached by the school system, and where they were, went largely through the relatively benign missionary system. Bantu Education on the other hand drew in a larger proportion of youth to at least some experience of an under-resourced and repressive education system. Total enrollment in African schools grew from 938 211 in 1953-4 to 1 513 517 in 1960-1 (Horrell, 1964). What this rapid expansion of the education system did was to provide youth with a common set of political problems, and a common identity within which they could react to those problems. In a sense, the process may be thought of as analogous to monopoly industrialization. In industry, technical advance allows capital increasingly to dispense with skilled artisans, who can be replaced by a production line process. Such a process leads to a deskilling of the working class and the breaking down of craft unionism. But this process has often led to new possibilities for workers' resistance. Assembly line production leads to large concentrations of workers in single plants, to a production process which breaks down if any segment of it is interrupted, and to greater worker alienation (Braverman, 1974; Edwards, 1979). This kind of transformation of South African industry during the 1960s, for example, laid the basis for the industrial militancy of the 1970s and 1980s (Innes, 1983:171-83). In an analogous way, while Bantu Education subjected the youth to a far inferior education than that provided by the mission schools, it reached a far greater number of students for (on average) longer periods of time. It thus created a far bigger education system, with a far harsher character than its predecessor. The changing education system thus provided the structure which would bring youth together and give them a common frame of reference against which they would rebel. In an important sense Bantu Education was the gravedigger of apartheid.

One could also extend this line of thinking further and point out that the processes of monopolisation in industry and 'massification' in education are not only analogous, but are also really connected (Hyslop, 1987). An increasingly complex industrial structure requires a mass schooling system geared to its needs, as well as the regulation of other aspects of working class reproduction such as housing. During the 1960s and 1970s, the black working class thus experienced a brutal restructuring of its conditions of life, which must have been crucial in fostering the youth's awareness of itself as part of a wider dominated community (Hyslop, 1986).

THE AFRICAN EDUCATION MOVEMENT AND PEOPLE'S EDUCATION

The emergence of 'People's Education for People's Power' (Mkatshwa, 1986) as a major slogan and strategy of popular political movements in South Africa since late 1985 has tended to be perceived as an entirely new development. In an important political sense this is correct - for the first time the mobilization of social forces around educational issues was sufficiently strong for a struggle over the nature of the education system to be waged at a level which could really challenge the state's policy. But in a strictly historical sense People's Education is not at all a new concept. During the 1955-6 boycotts, leadership elements of the ANC advanced the slogan of People's Education in exactly the same sort of sense in which it has been used in the recent period - mobilization to transform education as an intrinsic part of a strategy for overall liberation.

An ANC leadership document of 1955 defines 'People's Education' as 'Democratic-Liberatory education ... It will be Democratic in control, organisation and purpose ... It will be Liberatory in object because its main objective will be to equip the people and the youth to fulfil their historic task of liberating themselves'.³¹ This is close to current definitions of People's Education as 'education for liberation'. In a similar way the 1955 proponents of People's Education put forward a set of aims - raising popular literacy level, politicization of the masses, creating an attitude of service to the people - which overlap substantially with the calls from the 1985 National Crisis Committee Conference which demonstrated a similar concern with conscientization, overcoming illiteracy and changing the competitive values of education.³² This similarity is not, of course, fortuitous. It reflects the continuation of a particular political tradition as the dominant one within South African oppositional politics, namely the 'national - democratic', non-racial tradition established by the Congress movement during the 1950s. The strength of this tradition has been its clear focus on the central issue in South African politics - namely the exclusion of the majority from access to political power. This focus has ensured that the slogans and strategies coined in the 1950s have continued to have an enormous appeal, despite the fact that they have sometimes been put forward in a way which ignores intervening social changes. Thus there is a continuing, overwhelming popular response to the slogans of the Freedom Charter, despite the fact that 'The People' whom it hails are a very different 'People' from that of the 1950s - more proletarian, more urbanised, engaged in wholly different patterns of production and reproduction.

The attack from this position on 'Bantu Education' is a case in point. Political attacks on the state's education policy are often distinctly

lacking in nuance, in that they ignore the abandonment of Verwoerd's Bantu Education ideology in favour of a more technocratic one, and pay little attention to the state's attempts to restructure education along somewhat more class-divided and less race-divided lines (for popular movements' views on education, SPCC, 1986; Chisholm and Christie, 1983; and Chisholm, 1984, for analysis of state education strategy). Nevertheless, the alternative of People's Education has remained a convincing one because its proponents have continued to focus on the central issue of the sheer material inequality along racial lines in education. In fact, the conditions of the 1980s have proved far more propitious for the 'People's Education' approach than those of the 1950s. While there was some attempt in the 1950s to popularize the slogan - Peter Ntithe, a Congress Youth League activist, for example, greeted a 1955 Sophiatown conference on Bantu Education with the words 'Long live(s) the People's Education'³³ - during the 1950s boycotts the slogan was not widely taken up. It was not until the 1980s when there was a far more substantial mass challenge to the education system that the 'People's Education' approach really came into its own, and the term was widely used.

The alternative educational facilities provided by the African Education Movement during the 1955-6 boycotts were known as Cultural Clubs - the Bantu Education Act prevented them from presenting themselves as schools or teaching formal courses. Considering the lack of available resources and funding, the AEM did a remarkable job, sustaining networks of clubs on the Rand and in the Eastern Cape through the period of the boycott. ANC members, and also members of the white Congress of Democrats provided co-ordination and support for these projects. The best of the Cultural Clubs were well run: one at Korsten in the Eastern Cape for example provided 'games, physical exercises, health talks and singing' as well as a feeding scheme for the children.³⁴ In New Brighton an effective club was run for about 1 000 children which boasted a well trained choir.³⁵ At Veepplaats 900 children were in the cultural club³⁶ and at Brakpan 800 (Berman, 1955). At Kleinskool the club was so effective that even after a year 75% of the children in the area were attending its programme of 'games, bible studies, singing ...'³⁷

The back-up provided to clubs by the AEM was very competent, considering the lack of financial resources. A timetable and guidelines for club leaders were provided. Training groups for the club leaders were held once a fortnight, (Berman, 1955) and larger-scale training courses were also run occasionally, especially during 1956.³⁸ At these training courses talks were given by prominent figures like Resha, J Hadebe, Norman Levy, Helen Joseph and (on one occasion) Eddie Roux.³⁹ The AEM also supplied clubs with

good quality educational material, on roneoed sheets, covering games, stories, history, geography, maths and English.⁴⁰ Most of the material did not have a specifically political orientation, and was broad in its scope. Recommended reading included Paton's *Cry The Beloved Country*, an interesting choice considering the disfavour into which the book later fell in African Nationalist circles.⁴¹ Culturally the material drew on both Western and African traditions.⁴² The material for the most part was directed to the passing on of real skills, and to the transmission of moral precepts of the type: 'We must not think of the present only, but we must always prepare ourselves for the future'.⁴³ However some of the material did address social and political issues. A well written history lesson sought to make quite complex points.⁴⁴ Cultural club leaders were advised to explain the Bantu Education Act and the campaign against it to their students, and to teach them the Freedom Charter.⁴⁵ One draft programme for the Cultural Club recommended, as well as a 'talk by Anglican priest or any other denomination', discussions on the lives of radical leaders like Johannes Nkosi, Bill Andrews, Dr Dadoo, Moses Kotane, Albert Luthuli, J B Marks and Mao Tse Tung;⁴⁶ this recommendation is not really characteristic of the general tone of AEM material however. The participating children nevertheless seem to have identified clearly with the aims of the boycott. Huddleston records that when Sophiatown children passed the Bantu Education school they would give Congress salutes and yell 'Verwoerd, Verwoerd', and that those attending the cultural clubs sang the song:

There are only two ways for Africa ... one way leads to Congress
and one way to Verwoerd (Huddleston, 1981:131-32).

The AEM's activities were thus an exemplary use of extremely limited resources. Within months of the call for a boycott there was in existence a network of Cultural Clubs and training facilities for leaders and a supply of educational materials which could be used in the clubs. In this respect the current campaign for People's Education has in a sense not been as effective as its predecessor. Although the call for People's Education was made in late 1985, it was not until early 1987 that the first People's Education material was produced. Although informal People's Education activity was taking place among the youth during 1986, there was a lack of organised programmes. Moreover, little thought seems to have been given to who would lead the People's Education groups. The teaching profession is heavily populated by people with an unsympathetic view of the politics of People's Education, and most school students, whatever their political commitment, lack the educational skills to lead such a process. These

problems are obviously not easy to solve; and the level of political repression has been far greater than in the 1950s. But any form of People's Education would need the kind of practical back-up which the AEM managed to provide. Perhaps part of the answer lies in decentralised initiative. In the 1950s boycott individuals or groups were struck off to perform certain tasks and there has been an emphasis on national, centralised initiatives, and a distinct sectarianism by some People's Education proponents to alternative educational activities seen to have the 'wrong line'. It seems unlikely that a system of educational alternatives can be put in place unless educational resources are mobilised at a local level, and initiative is devolved, even at the expense of uniformity in content. Indeed, an education system which seeks to break with the values of the present one needs, by definition, to embrace diversity.

A further aspect of the AEM's work which present day People's Education could learn from is the fact that it tried to impart concrete skills of literacy and numeracy and cover a broad range of all round knowledge. There has been something of a tendency for contemporary People's Education to emphasise the need to attack and counter the most obviously ideological aspects of the present education system, notably the History syllabus. This is indeed important; but an educational system which aims to equip the subordinate classes to take control of their society cannot limit itself to this. Rather, it must equip youth to analyse both social relations and technical problems for themselves, to think critically, to be competent verbally and numerically. In other words it must teach concrete intellectual skills; not a political 'line' but the ability to form a political understanding of the world. It was in this sense that Gramsci urged the need for working class education to be based on a broad cultural formation and hard intellectual work (Gramsci, 1978:26-43; 1977:10-13). He comprehended that a subaltern class would only become the ruling class if it fully understood how society worked.

Nevertheless, the achievement of the AEM should not be exaggerated. As a whole it reached a very small proportion of the school population. As of mid-1955, the numbers at Cultural Clubs on the Rand totalled somewhat over 2000 (Berman, 1955). Attendance in the Eastern Cape, as of the beginning of the boycott, (or early 1956, according to the availability of data) seems to have amounted to something in the region of 4000.

Thus it seems that the total numbers attending the Cultural Clubs was of the order of 6000. While this was a considerable achievement, it ought to be remembered that by 1955 there were over one million African children in school (Horrell, 1964:41). While in the areas where the boycott was strongest the proportion of those attending Cultural Clubs was very large, in

national terms they reached only just under one school student in every 166. This clearly did not constitute an alternative system of education.

Nor could the AEM overcome the problem of the lack of political structures for youth. In June 1955 an attempt was made to launch a youth organisation known as the Baputsele. It was modelled on the Scouts and Guides movement, but had a radical political content.⁴⁸ However, it seems to have rapidly faded away. Despite considerable enthusiasm from the youth for participation in the Cultural Clubs, the AEM did not solve the problem which had faced the ANCYL - that of structuring a mass youth politics.

THE PROBLEM OF CHALLENGING STATE EDUCATION SYSTEMS: 1956 AND 1986

Despite the great courage and imagination that the activists of the 1955-6 boycott showed, the fact remains that they suffered an absolute and crushing defeat. The number of African students who enrolled for the 1956 school year was an increase of almost 85 000 over 1955 (Horrell, 1964:41). During the second half of the 1950s enrollment in Bantu Education schools rose from less than one million to over a million and a half, and the schooling system was effectively restructured along the lines envisaged by Verwoerd. So the boycott was unable to block the implementation of Bantu Education. It thus seems important to ask the question why it proved impossible to sustain a People's Education initiative alongside Bantu Education and to ask whether this has any relevance for the present. Obviously, state repression and the kind of tactical and organisational vicissitudes to which any political movement is subject played an important role in undermining the boycotts. But there were underlying ambiguities and difficulties in trying to provide a counter-hegemonic education system which were not squarely faced, and which principally account for the failure of initial resistance to Bantu Education. These difficulties are endemic to attempts to provide an alternative education in the context of a state which is capable of sustaining itself, and they confront today's People's Education initiatives in equal measure.

Repression by the state certainly confronted the boycott movement. In April 1955 Verwoerd expelled 7000 from school; in July he decreed that they were to be readmitted the following year only if their parents gave undertakings about their behaviour, and if their case had been investigated by the School Committees (*The Torch*, 19.07.55). In the same period, 116 teachers were removed from their posts (*The Torch*, 21.06.55). There were 'constant' raids on Cultural Clubs by the police (Berman, 1955); this placed severe limitations on the type of activities which the clubs could offer, as an item like a blackboard could be used by police as evidence of an illegal school (Berman, 1958; Huddleston, 1981:131). The state strove to

disrupt AEM activities: for example, In January 1956 30 Eastern Cape Cultural Club leaders were restricted from travelling to Johannesburg for a training course at Alexandra. In view of this the AEM decided to hold a course in Port Elizabeth at Easter. But the imposition of a ban on meetings forced them to move it to Uitenhage. On the second day of the course, the Special Branch and the location superintendent arrived and took away organisers Helen Joseph and Norman Levy. Municipal police tried to take the names of those at the meeting, but the delegates refused to co-operate. The SAP then arrived in force and ordered the meeting to disperse, which it did after singing to show defiance.⁴⁹ The next day the conference continued, in secret, in the countryside. The police also discouraged hall owners from allowing the Cultural Clubs to use their facilities. Where students mounted pickets at schools, these were broken up by the police.⁵⁰

However, the boycott's lack of success cannot really be accounted for by these realities. Police action and Verwoerd's threats did not drive the bulk of those participating in the Cultural Clubs back to schools - the clubs sustained themselves well into 1956. Moreover, the repression was very limited compared to the situation in the 1970s and 1980s. There are no reports of the use of fire-arms against school students nor of arrests of substantial numbers of them. Yet in the 1970s boycotts have sustained themselves for longer than in the earlier period. The boycott and the AEM clearly did face a greater deal of harrasment at the hands of the authorities, but this does not in itself explain the campaign's lack of success.

Problems of organisation and tactics were another factor which may have had an impact on the anti-Bantu Education campaign's fate. The ANC certainly had difficulties in the area of organisation. At its 1954 conference, the NEC complained about bad administration at the provincial committee level, and the unwieldy size of branches, which could run to a thousand members;⁵¹ while at the 1955 conference the NEC pointed out that it was handicapped by the local leadership's inability to efficiently forward membership fees and levies to the national organisation.⁵² There were also some tactical problems in the way in which the school boycott was organised. At the 1954 ANC conference, the issue was 'handed over' to the women's and youth sections of the movement,⁵³ a development which meant that it tended to be seen as a sectoral issue, of interest to women and youth only. At the ANC's 1955 conference the NEC pointed out this danger, noting that Bantu Education was directed against 'the entire liberatory struggle' and that the campaign 'should not be handled in isolation from other campaigns'.⁵⁴ The wrangle within the ANC as to when and where the boycott should start also caused difficulties for the campaign. According to the ANC's Cape organiser, T E Ka Tshunungwa, it created 'a confused

situation' and 'dampened spirits throughout the country'.⁵⁵ These setbacks seem to have been linked to problems of local-level organisation. When the NEC met in March 1955 to decide on whether to go ahead with the boycott, no local reports were available to it.⁵⁶ Ka Tshunungwa felt too, that the leadership did not adequately communicate conference decisions to members.⁵⁷ But again, these tactical and organisational issues do not provide the key to the boycott's limited impact. Despite such problems, the ANC was able to launch campaigns which drew enormous popular support during the 1950s. Whatever problems they experienced in organising their initiatives do not seem to have prevented them from drawing a widespread following. There is thus no reason to assume that organisational difficulties dealt a fatal blow to the anti-Bantu Education campaign.

The fundamental weakness of the campaign was its lack of clarity on the issue of whether or not it was seeking to provide a permanent alternative system to Bantu Education. In ANC policy discussions and activity three distinct views of the role of the Cultural Clubs emerge: these three views were not in reality separated out, but were often used in some combination. The AEM's activities were variously portrayed as:

- * a protest against the Bantu Education Act, which would be of limited duration;
- * a temporary provision of cultural activities and child care, but not an all-round education for school students, during the course of a boycott of indefinite length;
- * an attempt to establish an alternative, popular education which would continue until the collapse of the Nationalist government.

Often these various conceptions sat together in the same speech or article. This lack of clarity created in the minds of some ANC supporters the idea that the movement could permanently provide education for their children - an impression which led inevitably to disillusionment.

A popular movement can create its own educational structures on a mass scale in periods of mass mobilization. But in a modern industrializing country with millions of school students, no movement can sustain such popular educational system outside of state structures for long. In an insurrectionary situation, the creation of an educational system outside the state-provided ones can provide the basis for a new educational order which can be brought into being in the post-revolutionary period. However if the state refuses to fall, it is inevitable that popular education movements, which want to be an institutional alternative will, like other forms of popular or workers' institutions, be eroded. A popular movement which does not control the state simply cannot find the material resources to support the tens of thousands of teachers or instructors; the millions

of rands necessary for the most rudimentary educational equipment; the complex bureaucratic planning which is required for the maintenance of any permanent mass education system. Consider the cost of providing a single text book to the over a million school students of the 1950s or the several million school students of today.

Only if it is possible to conquer the state does the possibility of the popular movement providing an educational infrastructure open up. Popular education movements are therefore likely to be undermined by their material weaknesses. But they are also liable to be debilitated by their own status as 'alternative' institutions. If an existing social order is not overthrown, the student is going to be faced with the need to enter the labour market. It rapidly becomes clear to both parent and child that the student who has been to a state school will have a form of certification which will be accepted by employers, while a student who has been through an 'alternative' education system will not only lack certification, but will be negatively affected in terms of employment opportunities if the employer knows of his or her background. The result of these factors is likely to be a steady drift of students away from 'People's Education' and towards state schools. Thus a 'People's Education' movement which tries to maintain itself as a separate entity from the state system is liable to wither away.

There is however an alternative course for such a movement. It may recognise that it cannot continue as it is and move to a more realistic strategy of providing some limited alternative activities and input for students inside the state system, combined with a political struggle to change aspects of state education policy and to transform school practices through community and student activity at a local level. In this way, a long-term struggle for a People's Education can be successfully carried on by attempting to block the state's educational agenda, and impose a popular agenda on it instead. In such a drawn out struggle the education system is thus viewed, by the popular movement as a 'terrain of struggle' rather than as an entity which can be swept away at one blow. In a non-insurrectionary situation such a strategy becomes vital to the survival of a People's Education movement. The 1950s boycotts did not face these issues squarely. Given the fact that there was no prospect of the ANC coming to power, the idea which was prevalent in the boycott that a new educational system could be built outside that of the state was totally unrealistic, and led inevitably to the failure of the campaign and disillusion on the part of parents and students.

When the notion of a campaign on the Bantu Education Act was first floated by the ANC at its December 1953 conference in Queenstown, no tactics were specified, but the aim was identified as the repeal of the Act.⁵⁸

This conception of the campaign as a short-term protest against the Act seems to have been carried on by the ANCYL working committee set up to plan the campaign. In their view it should attempt to be a 'country-wide demonstration' and should try to counter the effects of Bantu Education 'primarily by raising the political consciousness and understanding of the Youth and Students'.⁵⁹ The action should take the form of 'withdrawal of children from schools for a defined period'.⁶⁰ However, once the boycott movement developed some momentum it began to open itself up to the idea that Congress could provide children with a permanent education alternative; the way for such an understanding of the campaign was prepared by the use of such ambiguous terms as 'alternative educational and cultural activities for African children',⁶¹ in the planning of the boycott.

This ambiguity was quickly transformed by some elements of the ANC into an understanding of the Cultural Clubs as a permanent alternative to Bantu Education. 'Once the people have rejected Bantu Education' a Congress publication wrote in November 1955, 'they will find an alternative to Bantu Education and to the entire slave education of this country'.⁶² Similarly a Congress of Democrats document of the same year describes the AEM programme as 'a direct alternative to the school education'.⁶³ This grew into a somewhat triumphalist view of what the Cultural Clubs and the boycott could achieve. At the 1955 conference of the Transvaal ANCYL the campaign was prematurely described by the Provincial Executive as a 'victory' and the Executive went on to assert that 'The uncompromising implementation of the decision to withdraw the children must lead to destruction [of Bantu Education]'.⁶⁴ Because of the practical and legal difficulties of carrying out formal schooling in the Cultural Clubs, the AEM evolved the idea of a system of Home Education, in which the AEM would provide material which students could study under parental supervision.⁶⁵ Not only did such a scheme have if anything even greater material problems inherent in its realisation (provision of study kits, illiteracy amongst parents, etc.) but it was also interpreted in a way which fed into the idea of an AEM 'alternative', setting out to provide 'a start in formal education'.⁶⁶ The rampant ambiguity about the future of the boycott is demonstrated by a 1955 article by an AEM activist. Having written '"How much of an alternative do [Cultural Clubs] provide?" ... frankly we must answer: "... not very much"', she goes on to assert, contradictorily that: 'There will be Cultural Clubs as long as there is Bantu Education' (Berman, 1955).

In fact substantial elements of the Congress leadership were clear from the beginning about the limitations of what they could provide in the educational sphere; their problem was that the creation of the Cultural Clubs generated unrealistic expectations. Robert Resha had told the con-

ference that launched the boycott of the 'practical impossibility of providing alternate primary education', and saw the Cultural Clubs as strictly limited to cultural and recreational activities (*Counter Attack*, 18.04.55). In assessing the campaign at the end of 1955, the ANC's NEC recognised the difficulties which had been created by the ambiguity on the issue; 'We must beware of creating the false impression that by isolated local boycotts the Bantu Education Act can be defeated ... we must not deceive ourselves or the people into believing that in the immediate future we can, with our resources, substitute a national education system. We have no state budget behind us'.⁶⁷ By late 1956, the NEC had followed through the logic of this view by calling off the indefinite boycott (*New Age*, 06.12.56).

In the course of the boycott, the ANC came increasingly to realise the material difficulties standing in the way of any alternative educational system. At the conference held in late 1955, the NEC criticized the 'undue emphasis' laid on alternative facilities. This, they concluded, had strengthened the argument that Bantu Education was better than no education (presumably because of the disillusion caused by the limitations of the service AEM could provide).⁶⁸ As Congress leader Z K Matthews commented in retrospect: 'The boycott failed principally because of the difficulty of organizing an alternative programme for the children' (Matthews and Wilson, 1983:131). By late 1956, the Cultural Clubs were in a state of collapse, chiefly because of a simple lack of funding.⁶⁹ A discussion of the clubs presented at the 1956 conference of the Transvaal ANC identified lack of money to pay Cultural Club leaders as the main problem which was undermining the clubs. Many club leaders had left because of the lack of an income, and the remainder were expected to do so at the beginning of the next year.⁷⁰ But even before this collapse, the Cultural Clubs were placed in a position where they simply could not provide adequate resources for the numbers of children attending. For example, in September 1956, the Brakpan Cultural Club reported that with 'about eight' leaders it was endeavouring to cater for 758 children, divided into 13 separate groups, and all meeting in the open air.⁷¹ Even given the limited extent of the boycott, the AEM simply did not have the material resources to undertake the task it was attempting.

'We must cry for our children' said an ANC speaker in Moroka in June 1955, even as he urged parents to participate in the boycott.⁷² Parents' concern for the future employability of their children first limited support for the boycott and then undermined it. Boycott organisers were never able to counter this problem effectively. Only the state schools could provide a route to certification acceptable to employers, and given that the existing social order would clearly not change in the short term, the

inexorable forces of the labour market pushed school students away from an alternative system. From the first, the NEC found the response to the boycott 'not enthusiastic' (Matthews and Wilson, 1983:179). As the NEC recognised in its assessment of the campaign at the end of 1955, all it could offer a parent through the campaign was an act of 'political conviction'.⁷³ Parents, were generally unwilling to make this sacrifice of their children's future except in a few highly politicized areas of the country, as even strong proponents of the boycott like Father Huddleston acknowledged (Huddleston, 1981:129). This reluctance was also underlain by the parents' more immediate fears about the safety of their children. Z K Matthews points out that for black working parents, schools had important child care functions beyond their educational role. They kept students 'safe from accidents and juvenile delinquency' while their parents were at work (Matthews and Wilson, 1983:180). Given the material weakness of the Cultural Clubs, they could not substitute for schools on a mass scale in this role. Problems with persuading parents of the benefits of the boycott even extended into the ranks of the ANC itself. In the Cape, the provincial organiser had to suspend 'quite a number of people' from membership because of refusal to withdraw their children from school - such suspensions took place in about 25 Cape branches.⁷⁴ Even amongst parents who could be persuaded to participate in the boycott there was a steady decline of support. The Veeplaats Cultural Club for example started with 900 children in 1955, but this had fallen to about 500 at the beginning of 1956.⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

People's Education has posed an undoubtedly valid issue: the need for an education system which corresponds to the needs of the majority, as part of an overall programme of social transformation. That programme cannot, however, be advanced by a chimerical attempt to build an alternative outside the very schools into which the realities of existence in industrial capitalist society thrust working class youth. Rather it is by struggling to transform schools from within that concrete change can be brought about in the educational experience of youth, and that the concrete experience can be gained which will allow a detailed understanding of how, in practical terms, the aims of People's Education can be attained. This is the lesson of both 1956 and 1986.

NOTES

1. AD1812 Ea 3 *The Youth Movement in South Africa*, n.d.
2. AD1812 Ea 3.4 *Afrika* n.d.
3. AD1812 Ea 3.4.1 *Youth Prepare 1954*: Report of ANCYL Conference at Kabah

township, Uitenhage, 26th June, 1954.

4. AD1812 Ea 3.2.4.2 *Executive Report to the 12th Provincial Conference of the African National Congress Youth League (Transvaal) : Report of the Credentials Committee 1955.*
5. AD1812 Ea 3.4 *The African Lodestar*, April 1953. This paper was sometimes titled in this way, and sometimes as simply 'The Lodestar'; its numbering and dating were also erratic.
6. AD1812 Ea 3.3 D. Nokwe *Circular letter* to Executive, 14th January 1954.
7. *Idem.*
8. AD1812 Ea 3.1 *Programme for the Building of a Mass Youth League* (Resolution passed ANCYL Conference, Uitenhage, 26th and 27th June, 1954).
9. AD1812 Ea 3.2.4.9 *African National Congress Youth League (Cape) 3rd November, 1955.*
10. AD1812 Ea 3.3 D Nokwe *Circular Letter*, 18th January, 1954; AD1812 Ea 3 *The African Lodestar*, October, 1954.
11. AD1812 Ea 3.1 J.P. Manne *OPO's Round Up* n.d.
12. AD1812 Ea 3.1 J.P. Manne *OPO's Round Up* n.d.; AD1812 Ea 3.4.2 *Executive Report to the 12th Provincial Conference of the African National Congress Youth League (Transvaal).*
13. AD1812 Ea 3.2.2 Working Committee of the ANCYL *Draft Plan for the Campaign Against Bantu Education 1954.*
14. AD1812 Ea 3.2.4.2 *Presidential Report to Provincial Conference Tvl African National Congress Youth League 1955.*
15. AD1812 Ea 1.7 *The Annual Report of the 43rd Annual General Conference of the African National Congress held at Bochabela Hall, Bloemfontein on the 16th to 18th December 1955: Executive Report.*
16. AD1812 Ea 3.4.2 *Presidential Report to Provincial Congress of ANCYL (1955) op. cit.*
17. AD1812 Ea 3.4 *The Lodestar* vol. 10, no. 1, August 1956.
18. AD1812 Ea 3 T. Makiwane *Circular letter* for ANCYL (Tvl.), November 1956.
19. AD1812 Ea 3.2.5.4 *Draft Resolutions Presented to the Eastern Cape Regional Conference of the African National Congress Youth League, 23rd June, 1956.*
20. AD1812 Ea 3.4 *The African Lodestar*, May 1954.
21. AD1812 Ea 3.4 *The Lodestar* vol. 10, no. 1, 1956,
22. AD1812 Ea 3.4.2 *Executive Report to the 12 Provincial Conference (1955) op. cit.*
23. AD1812 Ea 3.2.4.9 T.E. Ka Tshunungwa *The African National Congress Cape Provincial Secretariat Report: January - November 1955: 16th November 1955.*

24. AD1812 Ea 3.3 Y. Putini *Circular Letter*, 23 September, 1955.
25. AD1812 Ea 3.2.4.9 T.E. Ka Tshunungwa (1955), *op. cit.*
26. AD1812 *Copy of Notes made by Solomon Dunga of a Meeting of the African National Congress Held at Alexandra on 8.4.56: Report by Phineas Nene*; AD1812 Ea 3.2.4.2 *Resolutions of the Annual Conference of the African National Congress Youth League (Transvaal) Held on Sunday 23rd May 1954 at the Trades Hall 30 Kerk Street, Johannesburg*; AD1812 Ea 3.3 Y. Putini *Circular Letter* 25th August 1955; AD1812 Ea 3.4 *The African Lodestar* 1954-5; AD1812 Ea 3.4.2 Executive Report to the 12th Provincial Conference (1955) *op. cit.*
27. AD1812 Ea 3.4 *The African Lodestar* 1955.
28. AD1812 Ea 3.4.2 *Executive Report Sophiatown Branch ANCYL*, 2nd August 1956.
29. *Idem.*
30. AD1812 Ea 1.3 *Resolutions of the African National Congress Annual Conference*, 1954.
31. AD1812 Ea 1.11.2.3 National Secretariat document attached to "Anti Bantu Education Action Committee Conference held at Matabe Hall, Sophiatown on Sunday the 9th January, 1955".
32. Compare the document cited in footnote 31 with the National Consultative Conference resolution "On People's Education I" in SPPC (1986) *op. cit.*, p. 30.
33. AD1812 Ea 3.4 *The African Lodestar* 1955.
34. AD1137 Ca 3.4.1 *Report of Cultural Club Activities in the Eastern Cape (Uitenhage Conference) Easter 1956.*
35. *Idem.*
36. *Idem.*
37. AD1137 Ca 3.4.1 *Report of Cultural Club Activities ... (1956) op. cit.*
38. AD1137 Ca 3.2.1 Material on Alexandra Training course 9-13 January 1956; AD1137 Ca 3.4.1 Untitled document relating to conference of Cultural Club leaders, Port Elizabeth 4th March 1956; AD1137 Ca 3.4.2 to Ca 3.4.3 *Group Leaders Conference* Port Elizabeth 19th July 1956; AD1137 Ca 3.3.3 Material relating to training meeting at Benoni 15th September 1956.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Berman*, 1955; AD1137 Ca 4.2.2 Material from the AEM.
41. AD1137 Ca 4.1.3 *Draft Programme of Activities for Cultural Clubs* n.d. (1955-6 presumably).
42. AD1137 Ca 4.2.5 AEM material n.d.; AD1137 Ca 3.3.4 AEM material.
43. AD1137 Ca 4.2.5 AEM material.
44. AD1137 Ca 3.3.4 *Part 3. The Cape Under Dutch Rule* n.d.

45. AD1137 Ca 4.2 *Bantu Education Training Courses: Material for Group Leaders* 23rd July 1955.
46. AD1137 Ca 4.1.3 Draft Programme (n.d.) *op. cit.*
47. AD1137 Ca 3.4.1 Report of Cultural Club Activities (1956) *op. cit.*
48. AD1812 Ea 3.5 *The First Report of the Baputsela Youth Organisation* June-October 1955.
49. AD1137 Ca 3.4.1 Document relating to conference of Cultural Club leaders, Port Elizabeth 4th March, 1956.
50. AD1812 Ea 3.4.2 *Executive Report to the General Annual Meeting of the African National Congress Youth League Sophiatown Branch held on 2nd August 1956.*
51. AD1812 Ea 1.7.3 *The Annual Report of the National Executive Committee to the 42nd Annual Conference of the African National Congress held at the Bantu Social Centre, Durban, on the 16th to the 19th December 1954.*
52. AD1812 Ea 1.7 The Annual Report of the 43rd Annual General Conference (1955) *op. cit.*
53. AD1812 Ea 1.7.3 The Annual Report of the NEC to the 43rd Annual Conference ... (1954) *op. cit.*
54. AD1812 Ea 1.7 The Annual Report of the 43rd Annual General Conference (1955) *op. cit.*
55. AD1812 Ea 3.2.4.9 Ka Tshunungwa (1955) *op. cit.*
56. AD1812 Ea 1.7 The Annual Report of the 43rd Annual General Conference (1955) *op. cit.*
57. AD1812 Ea 3.2.4.9 Ka Tshunungwa (1955) *op. cit.*
58. AD1812 Ea 1.7 *Resolutions Adopted by the 41st Annual Conference of the African National Congress held at Queenstown on 18th - 20th December 1953*; AD1812 Ea 1.7 *Resolutions Adopted by the National Conference 20th December 1953.*
59. AD1812 Ea 3.2.5 Working Committee of the ANCYL ... (1954) *op. cit.*
60. Iden.
61. AD1812 Ea 1.7.6 *Resolutions Adopted at the Special Conference of Organisations Opposed to the Bantu Education Act Port Elizabeth 1955.*
62. AD1812 Ea 1.14.1.4 *Congress Voice* November 1955.
63. AD1137 Ca 1.1.1 COD *Education for Knowledge* 1955; for a similar view see AD1812 Ea 3.4 *The Lodestar* vol. 10. no. 1, August 1956.
64. AD1812 Ea 3.4.2 Executive Report to the 12th Provincial Conference ... (1955) *op. cit.*
65. AD1137 Ca 1.1.1 COD (1955) *op. cit.*
66. AD1137 Ca 3.2.1 *The Cultural Clubs and Home Education* (Alexandra Township Training Session January 1956).
67. AD1812 Ea 1.7 The Annual Report of the 43rd Annual General Conference

(1955) *op. cit.*

68. AD1812 Ea 1.7 The Annual Report of the 43rd Annual General Conference *op. cit.*
69. AD1812 Ea 1.11.2.6 *Our Cultural Clubs* (document from the 1956 Conference of the Transvaal ANC Lady Selbourne 3rd and 4th November, 1956).
70. *Idem.*
71. AD1137 Ca 3.3.2 *Brakpan Cultural Club* Benoni 15th September, 1956.
72. AD1812 Ea 1.8.3 *Notes Made by N/D/Sgt. Douglas Ndaba of a meeting of the African National Congress Field at Dadoo Square Moroka* 19th June, 1955.
73. AD1182 Ea 1.7 The Annual Report of the 43rd Annual General Conference (1955) *op. cit.*
74. AD1812 Ea 3.2.4.9 *Ka Tshunungwa* (1955) *op. cit.*
75. AD1137 Ca 3.4.1 *Report of Cultural Club Activities ...* (1956) *op. cit.*

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