

Speech by Mbeki at Congress of SADTU

Durban, 6 September 1998

Chairperson,
Comrade President and members of the leadership of SADTU,
Comrades delegates:

I bring you the warm greetings of your comrades, the leadership and the members of your organisation, the African National Congress.

We sincerely wish this important Congress success, in the interests of the genuine emancipation of our people and the successful reconstruction and development of our country.

Among us, it is a matter of common cause that the freedom we enjoy today was brought about by the united struggle of our people, who carried out an offensive on all fronts, including the front of education of which you form an important component part.

Among the black masses of our country, the only people who played no role in freeing our people from the chains of slavery were the puppets and the criminals.

This, of course, is not surprising.

Two features consign the puppet and the criminal to the same camp of enemies of the people. These are the absence of any sense of morality, a condition of amorality, and a complete devotion to the fulfillment of the personal, animal needs of the individual concerned.

These ugly products of our ugly past are always ready to do anything at all, however destructive, provided it serves their selfish material needs and interests.

These are the barbarians in our midst, who cast a shadow of shame over a proud native people of Africa whose entire social being and conduct has been informed by a deep-seated ethos of humanism and the intrinsic worth of the individual person.

You may ask why I speak so much of the dirt cast aside by the clean waters of the stream, the outcasts who were and are but a boil on an otherwise healthy body.

Comrade President:

I speak of the treacherous puppet and the criminal beast because I fear that the values that inform their behaviour have also infected very many in our society.

What was the dirt thrown out by the clean waters of the stream seems to have accumulated in such ample quantity that it has corrupted the clean waters of our stream and turned these healthy waters in the noxious effluent whose corrupting influence they had sought to fight.

As we worked together to elaborate the Reconstruction and Development Programme, we fell victim to the view that such reconstruction and development would consist in meeting the material needs of the people and creating the economy and institutions that would make this possible.

Strangely absent from the work that was done was the fundamental consideration that the better life we sought and continue to struggle for, would come about as a result of the conscious activity of the masses of our people and their democratic organisations.

In the Introduction to the RDP, we find the following undertaking:

"Those organisations within civil society that participated in the development of the RDP will be encouraged by an ANC government to be active in and responsible for the effective implementation of the RDP."

In reality, however, all of us have done very little to ensure that, first and foremost, the organisations of the Democratic movement, those that belong to the Congress tradition, were mobilised to ensure the realisation of the vision contained in the RDP.

Comrade President:

I am certain that if you asked the members of SADTU who are gathered here in an important Congress as to what they are, in all likelihood they would answer that they are teachers!

Would they be wrong! Of course, they would be correct.

But I would hope that if the President of the ANC asked them what they are, they would answer:

- that they are revolutionaries;
- that they are the advance guard of our intelligentsia dedicated to the fundamental renewal of our country;
- that they are motivated by the same commitment to serve the people of South Africa which inspired the commanders and combatants of Umkhonto we Sizwe to be ready to lay down their lives for no reward except the freedom of the oppressed!

SADTU itself is an organisation of professionals, a trade unions, an affiliate of Cosatu, a trade union federation that is an important and organic component part of our democratic movement. Further, I would not be surprised if the majority of your members are not members of supporters of the ANC.

As members of the ANC and of the formations that constitute our Alliance, we should indeed be proud to call ourselves revolutionaries, the vanguard of the forces dedicated to the fundamental renewal of our country, inspired to serve our people with no expectation of a reward except the upliftment of the masses of our people.

Certainly, if there are any members of the ANC who feel that they do not belong among the revolutionary frontline troops we are describing and are more appropriately defined by the evil spirit which drives the traitors and the criminals, then these do not belong among the ranks of our movement.

We would be better off if they resigned and joined other organisations where they can pursue their objectives in the midst of kindred spirits.

Happily, I know that those among you who belong to the ANC and the organisations of the Alliance will decline this invitation because of your firm commitment to the goals which our movement is committed to pursue.

Accordingly, because I am speaking amongst my own comrades, it becomes possible to speak frankly and even to demand what to another might appear to be the impossible.

Together, we are agents of change. We are comrades in the transformation process. As such, we are combatants for a new South Africa before we become public sector employees.

Accordingly, our relationship to the state and to our work as professionals is informed, first and foremost, by the fact that we are combatants for fundamental change,

Among other things, the Freedom Charter proclaims the stirring perspective that:

"The doors of learning and culture shall be opened... All the cultural treasures of humankind shall be opened to all, by free exchange of books, ideas and contact with other lands; the aim of education shall be to teach the youth to love their people and their culture, to honour human brotherhood, liberty and peace."

For its part, the RDP says:

"Human resources, unlike other resources, think for themselves! People are, and must remain, the architects of the RDP as it unfolds in the years to come... Human resource development must address the development of human capabilities, abilities, knowledge and knowhow to meet the people's ever-growing needs for goods and services, to improve their standard of living and quality of life. It is a process in which the citizens of a nation acquire and develop the knowledge and skill necessary for occupational tasks and for other social, cultural, intellectual and political roles that are part and parcel of a vibrant democratic society."

Put in other words - the fundamental renewal of our society means and requires the education and training of our people to attain the objectives spelt out in both the Freedom Charter and the RDP. The success of the revolution in which we are engaged depends on what happens in our schools, colleges and other institutions and processes of education.

The success of the revolution in which we are engaged depends on what the educators do. What the educators do depends on what you, the revolutionary vanguard among the educators, do, to provide the leadership and example which will mobilise both educator and student to conduct themselves as the cutting edge of the process of the fundamental renewal of our country.

Our first task as revolutionaries is to engage in a sustained offensive of education for liberation! For us, as members of our Liberation Alliance, our slogans must be:

For Liberation - education!

Every educator, a liberator!

Every liberator, an educator!

As revolutionaries, we must educate ourselves to understand that we live our lives not for the sake of a pay check at the end of the month.

Rather, we should be determined to earn the recognition of the masses of our people as that section of our country's intelligentsia which has committed its life to the transformation of all our people into the powerful force for change and self-fulfillment which they will become as a result of being educated.

I believe that as we reposition ourselves to live up to this commitment, we should recall the fact that our profession as educators has supplied some of the most outstanding and most revered leaders of our movement.

I refer here to heroes of our people such as Pixley ka Izaka Seme, John Langalibalele Dube, Sol Plaatje, Albert Luthuli, Z.K. Matthews, Govan Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, Jack Simons and Matthew Goniwe.

There is no reason why our government and SADTU itself cannot institute prestigious awards, named after these educator liberators, to recognise the contribution of current educators to the cause of the emancipation of our people through education, which our movement upholds.

It has correctly been said that teaching is a calling. Many of us can attest to this from our own experiences. In many respects, such positive elements as we may boast of with regard to what we are, we owe to our teachers.

You will agree with me that your profession is a calling. The success or failure of our nation depends on what happens at our schools and colleges.

All of us know this that, in the past, teachers used to be respected and accordingly accorded a special place, particularly in African society. This was so both because of the importance which the masses of our people attached to education and because the conduct of our teachers, both at school and in the community was exemplary.

Teachers were not just responsible for producing in the classroom people who became the pride of the nation.

Additionally, as part of the most advanced strata in society, they played an invaluable role in community and national affairs.

The eminent danger we now face, when, for the first time, education can now assume its rightful place in social development, is that producing the good citizen through education, particularly among Africans, is becoming the exception rather than the rule.

Thanks to a form of behaviour perhaps among a few of our educators, and especially teachers in our schools, the prestige of the profession is fast disappearing, to be replaced by contempt and derision for you, the professionals without whom the new society for which we yearn can never be born.

I must emphasise that here and further in this presentation, I am talking about a few among us whose behaviour tarnishes the image of the majority of dedicated teachers.

We are faced with many problems with regard to the provision of resources to education. This is despite the fact that a disproportionate portion of our national budget is allocated to this sector.

I do not have to inform you about the persistent huge racial and geographic disparities in resource allocation that continue to characterise our situation, the differences in the quality of the infrastructure and the professional quality of our human resources as well as the problems relating to the management of education by the state organs charged with this responsibility.

In some instances, even when your government has intervened to begin the process of addressing these enormous problems, those who live according to the rules of the traitors and the criminals - and I speak here of black people - have not hesitated to steal food from school children, to rob the children of their textbooks and to deny us the capacity to employ teachers who are willing to serve by collecting the salaries of phantom teachers.

There have also been instances of problems arising out of lack of information or because misleading information has been fed to yourselves. In other instances, there have been situations in which problems have emerged that have been difficult to explain.

At such times, it has been difficult not to conclude that a sinister hand, and perhaps the dirty tricks departments of the apartheid regime, are at work!

These and many other problems need our collective intervention and an intimate collaboration so that we address them adequately and speedily.

But I believe that the assertion would not be challenged by anyone of us that the transformation of education is on track, within and despite the constraints and challenges we have mentioned.

Comrade President,

Chairperson:

Let me now come to the bigger challenge.

This is the challenge of the teachers themselves.

I would like us to be frank with one another and criticize one another as comrades constructively, so that when we conclude this Congress we are certain that we have placed ourselves on the correct footing to be able to make the contribution to change that we ought to be making.

There is a worrying level of unprofessional behaviour that is bedeviling the teaching profession. This includes those who describe themselves as members of the revolutionary cadre of our country by virtue of their membership of SADTU, the ANC and COSATU.

Drunkenness among some teachers, even if they are few, is unacceptable.

I would like us to agree that this organisation should expel from its ranks any of its members who are found to be drunk during school hours. These we should not defend but should seek to exclude from the education system as enemies of the fundamental social change to which SADTU is and should be committed.

I am sure you will agree with me that it is unacceptable that teachers should persistently come late to school, leave early and otherwise seek to do as little work as possible.

Let us make those who behave in this way aware that they do not belong among us. We should not allow the situation that the misbehaviour of one or more members of SADTU condemns your organisation to be identified with the conduct of the traitors and the criminals.

Accountability to the people is one of the defining elements of our movement. And yet the strange reality is that the most militant opponents to any system of school supervision and inspection are to be found among the members of SADTU.

This organisation of the revolutionary intelligentsia of our country, at whose Congress you have gathered, cannot allow this to continue.

Similarly, many who are your members allow an atmosphere permissive of the collapse of discipline to prevail in their schools and classrooms, enabling them to join in the abuse of children, to betray their responsibilities as people who must act in loco parentis and to violate their basic contracts to convey to the young of our country their prescribed quantum of education and information.

As the most educated in our communities, many of us have made not effort to bring the parents into the system of school governance because we speak of service to the people as a pretence, intended to prepare the conditions for ourselves to advance our personal interests.

In this regard, we can say this without fear of being challenged with facts, that we have done very little to expose the ordinary working people of our country, whose children attend school, to the provisions of the Schools Act which create the possibility for democratic and popular participation in the system of school governance.

If we had the courage to be honest with ourselves, we would admit that many of best run schools in the country and many of the best teachers, are, respectively, managed by and belong to the older teachers and the teachers' organisations which we view as reactionary, simply because they do not know the revolutionary-sounding phrases which many among us are very competent at shouting out aloud.

As a result of this, and indeed the invaluable contribution of others who are members of SADTU, there are African schools in both rural and urban areas, no better endowed than any other of our schools, which regularly produce excellent results in terms of the pass rates among their students.

We all know this and, I suspect, you also know better than I do why this happens.

Compared to the devoted and competent professionals who manage to produce these results, we the members of SADTU, stand out as competent practitioners of the toyi-toyi.

We come across as militant fighters for a better pay cheque at the end of the month.

We are seen as excellent tacticians as to when to disrupt the school programme sot that we can extort from the Government the greatest material benefit for ourselves and create the space for ourselves to improve our own qualifications.

We behave in a manner which seems to suggest that we are alienated from the revolutionary challenge of the education of our youth and masses and greatly inspired by the value system which motivates the traitor and the criminal.

I know that even as you meet at this Congress, there are some who have come her not to address any of the fundamental questions we have raised.

Rather, their greatest ambition is that they should be elected to senior positions in SADTU on the basis that they are the best executioners of the toyi-toyi.

These want to be seen as the greatest pretenders to the title of representative of the revolutionary agenda and militant opponents of GEAR.

They want to pose as the most steadfast proponents of the spirit of "no compromise" in the promotion of the trade union rights of the members of SADTU, against the positions of the self-same government without which the workers and the masses of our country would not have achieved and will not achieve the advances which have been made.

In this self-serving struggle, which has nothing to do with the revolutionary tasks facing our movement as a whole, little regard is paid to the fact that much that is done in the name of militancy both does not serve the interests of the teachers and the people and is a welcome and perhaps organised gift to the forces of reaction.

Mother Theresa, the Missionary of Charity, defined herself in this way:

"By blood and origin I am all Albanian. My citizenship is Indian. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the heart of Jesus."

By blood and origin, you are all African. Your citizenship is South African. You are teachers drawn from all faiths.

As to your calling, you belong to the children of whom you take charge everyday and the parents and communities to which the young return when the school hours are over.

With regards to your hearts, this is a matter which you, like all of us in the organisations of the democratic movement, can only answer through practice and not simply on the basis of the membership cards you carry in your wallets.

As members of SADTU, an organisation that has positioned itself on the side of the democratic revolution, we have a responsibility, through our conduct, to demonstrate a level of dedication, responsibility and consciousness of our revolutionary tasks, which would define us as part of the principled offensive for the renewal of our country.

Your political representative, the African National Congress, has placed high on its programme of action the task to ensure a radical improvement in the quality of education we deliver to both young and old in our country, including the restoration of the culture of learning, teaching and service.

We know that we will make progress on this front, on the basis, in part, of our cooperation as members of our Liberation Alliance.

Now is the time that we judge whether we genuinely belong to the Alliance, not on the basis of the titles and membership cards we carry . but on the basis of whether what we do as individual professionals and as this Union defines us as revolutionaries or mere products of the apartheid society, whose ugly legacy the ordinary working people of our country seek to wipe out as quickly as possible.

Your comrades in the democratic movement to which you belong look forward to the results of this important Congress.

All of us are convinced that as we advance towards the second democratic elections in our country, your decisions will communicate the message to the masses of our people that our movement, of which you are an important part, truly serves the interests of the people of South Africa.

In addition we trust that you will come out in your tens of thousands to mobilise the masses of our people to register as voters, to participate in the elections and to vote for the ANC. We must approach this as the most important strategic task during this stage of our continuing struggle for genuine liberation.

We wish you success in your deliberations and thank you most sincerely for giving us this opportunity to participate in your proceedings, however briefly.

I would like this to happen that wherever I go in your country and abroad, I should be able that in our country we have a cadre of teachers who, by their conduct, we are opening the doors of learning and culture to the millions of our people whom the system of apartheid sought to imprison behind a wall of ignorance, darkness and death.

For liberation - education!

Every educator, a liberator!

Every liberator, an educator!

Long live SADTU - the army of educator liberators!

Amandla ngawethu!