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SITE OF STRUGGLE

Tony Weaver

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Wherever you go on the campus of the University of the Western Cape, construction site noise follows. Academics and students alike grimace and say "we've got used to it". Where there is no building under construction, or just completed, plans are already under way to build yet another new lecture block or facility.

UWC has a dynamism which must leave its creators bemused. It is the fastest-growing university in southern Africa, and the South African university with the most controversial political profile. It is the apartheid night-

mare come true: the loyal dog which turned on its master.

This is a university far removed from the little apartheid college established in the classic Vervoerdian ideological mould in 1959 in a primary school building in Bellville South. Then it earned the name "Bush", as in "Bush College". It was literally in the bush, surrounded by the drab Port Jackson and rookrans trees of the windswept Cape Flats, and it had little or no pretension to academic excellence.

The authorities could not have envisaged

then the enormous expansion of the "coloured" townships which today surround UWC and give it a central location on the Cape Flats. As an internal document titled "UWC 2001: The University of the Western Cape in a changing South Africa" notes: "There was no redeeming feature to offset the origins and the unattractive physical setting of UWC. The original members of staff were often not of the highest academic quality

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and, in most cases, were supporters of the apartheid policy. There was furthermore a narrow spread of faculties... In short, there was nothing that in any way could have been attractive to academically outstanding staff... 'Bush College' was indeed an appropriate name for UWC, viewed by its neighbouring universities and by the community at large as a second-rate institution."

That document was primarily drafted by "renegade" Afrikaner academic and Dutch Reformed Church minister, Professor Jaap Durand, UWC's present vice-rector. He and the rector, Professor Jakes Gerwel, are considered to be the moving force behind a new mood of academic and cultural enlightenment at UWC.

There are three key concepts afloat at UWC. Professor Gerwel ensures they are constantly debated. They are his notion of turning UWC into "an intellectual home of the left"; the question of boycotting as a strategy, and its efficacy; and UWC's attempt to establish itself *now* as the model of a post-apartheid seat of learning.

Everybody on campus refers to Professor Gerwel as "Jakes". Or rather, in Cape Flats pronunciation, "Dzakes". As in, at a student mass meeting: "Comrades, Dzakes says the question of a stayaway in solidarity with the workers on May Day is open to negotiation, and he's very sympathetic." In more than a month of talking to a cross-section of students and academics, the only times I heard him referred to as "Professor Gerwel" were when I spoke to conservative academics, to

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INSTITUUT VIR EIETYDSE GESKIEDENIS

Die Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat



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his secretary, and to the switchboard operators.

He has inspired phenomenal growth. In 1964, UWC had 391 students, there are 10 650 this year. The average annual increase has been about 15%, which would mean a student complement of 18 000 by 1992, 13 800 of whom would be full-time students. This is widely regarded by university planners as the maximum the campus can absorb.

"Jakes" is architect of the concept "intellectual home of the left." "Let me put it this way," he says. "All universities are committed to free inquiry and research, but the discourse in South African universities is all taking place within a dominant ideological context. The Afrikaans universities have always functioned within the framework of Afrikaner nationalism, in a material way... it fits into the schools, into the culture. Similarly with the English universities, their dominant context is that of English, Anglophile liberalism, and again this meshes into the organisational and social networks of

that culture, with big business being an important part of that. So we find that the one ideological formation which is under-represented is that which I would describe as the more radical left."

This, he says, is where UWC comes in: he hopes to make it the one university in the country where the intellectual left will find a home, a place where it constitutes the dominant ideological context meshing integrally with the "democratic movement".

"The history of this university," he explains, "is such that over the years it has developed a historical position where it links with the left organisationally in terms of networks, through its representation in the democratic movement, the extra-parliamentary movement. This is the university, I hope, where the left need not explain itself, does not have to fight for recognition, as it is forced to do at the liberal universities."

Much of the language he uses, concepts like "people's education", are tossed around

by what he and many of his staff refer to as "the liberation movement", broadly, the African National Congress. Which is not to suggest that he uses them lightly.

The son of eastern Cape peasant labourers who started a farm school and managed to provide each of 10 children with a post-secondary education or training, he said of his parents during his inaugural address on June 5 last year: "I salute them and parents like them for representing the real spirit of people's education."

He refers to the Freedom Charter as a model for some concepts he is examining, and hence the inevitable question arises: "In making these kinds of decisions, would you consult with the ANC on how they see the future of the university?"

The reply is guarded but unequivocal: "Let me put this as diplomatically as I can. It would be foolhardy for anyone to do any future planning for South Africa without taking into consideration the views of potentially important participants and actors in that future. I would not want to be so irresponsible about the future of this country as to start thinking about and planning for that future without recognising that the African National Congress is an important part of that future, and that it is itself doing certain thinking and planning in this matter."

Another voice heard at UWC is that of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who became chancellor in May this year. In his inaugural address he made a plea for a rethink on boycotts, the second subject of debate at UWC, and for long almost a way of life. A popular campus song in 1985 was set to the tune of the "Dem Stones" advertising jingle and

went "Dis boikot, boikot, boikot, join die boikot nou".

Archbishop Tutu cautioned: "We will fail and be left behind by others against whom we must compete if our university will constantly be interrupted by boycotts at the drop of the hat... if we are not restrained and disciplined we will give delight to the enemies of our struggle who will gloat and gleefully point to our university which has dedicated itself to our struggle as degenerating

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into a third rate institution where you don't know from one day to the next what the students are going to do."

At UWC, the cry at student mass meetings is often "hek toe" - "to the gate" - where after the students march down to the main gates, where public demonstrations, sometimes stoning of vehicles, and, almost inevitably, confrontation with the police follows.

The suggestion that boycotts have become a principle as opposed to a strategy, a specific political tactic, outrages student leaders in both the Student Representative Council and South African National Student's Congress. To them it smacks of Unity Movement politics, whereas the cross-section of student leaders I met are firmly Charterist, adherents to the idea of a non-racial democracy under the aegis of the Freedom Charter and the African National Congress.

They are serious politicians and leaders: politics is no game at UWC. Many of their comrades are in jail or exile, some have been killed. At last count there were 17 UWC students and alumni on trial for membership of the African National Congress and its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, and on charges varying from high treason and terrorism to sabotage. The views of eight student leaders I met are reported here as one voice:

"Let's get one thing straight. Boycott is not a principle. There must be radical change in South Africa, how does one achieve that? We have to use certain strategies, non-violent strategies. We find that it is necessary as a tactic to come out on boycott on specific issues, for example, about the late payment of bursaries by the education departments, an issue we won. The use of boycott as a strategy is something which has to be carefully assessed from situation to situation, which must be thoroughly and democratically debated.

"UWC is in transformation, it is not yet and will not be a liberated zone until apartheid is overthrown, so today it is still a site of struggle. There are still many things wrong with UWC, to change them we embark on boycotts, not because of a blind militancy, but to change our university into a progressive institution.

"It is vital to differentiate between the

types of boycotts. Firstly, there is directed action, for example, on the bursaries issue, an issue-related boycott. Secondly, although we have a progressive rector, there are inherent contradictions in any university, and in the process of struggle these have to play themselves out. There are reactionary and racist lecturers, and here we would boycott to force the administration to remove these people. Thirdly, there are solidarity boycotts to show the State we are united, that we support the demands of fraternal colleges and universities. And fourthly, there is community solidarity, like the three-day protest action called for by Cosatu and Nactu in June this year.

"UWC is not some strange beast which stands outside of and removed from the rest of South Africa. We are part of this country, part of the struggle for liberation."

A document circulated among members of the "progressive" lecturers association (University of the Western Cape Association for Democratic Educators) in March this year critically examined the boycott issue.

"In the present situation, in which the State is on the offensive against workers and students, the boycott remains an essential weapon of struggle, provided that it contributes to building the unity of progressive forces at UWC, ultimately the unity of the liberation movement," read the document.

"But it must also be recognised that the boycott becomes divisive when clear goals are not set and a conscious effort cannot then be made to win people over to those goals. The conditions prevailing at UWC make it possible for a boycott to be called without having to persuade students politically of the importance of the cause in which it is used."

Again, Professor Gervel is an important actor. He considers this debate crucial to the university's understanding of itself as an institution preparing for post-apartheid South Africa.

He says "what has transformed this university to its present position, has been student activism. That has been a primary moving force. It has often taken the form of educational boycotts. Now that the university has transformed itself into humani

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liberatory education, there is this tension between boycotts and the development of high quality liberatory education."

That tension sometimes runs at unacceptably high levels. The standard of work constitutional law lecturer, Isak Fredericks, expected from first year students and the level at which he taught led, in August, to thugery which included the sacking of the office of the dean of law, Daan van Rensburg, and threats to his person. A boycott was called and Professor Gervel closed the university. Claims by the Law Students' Council that the boycott was in fact "aimed at the entire system which retards blacks", both inside the faculty and in the legal profession, not only rang hopelessly hollow but were also ironic.

The law faculty is one of the key areas in "liberatory education". Professor Daan van Rensburg gave up a post at Unisa to join UWC in 1983, a "deliberate choice to make a contribution to a new South Africa". Interviewed before the law debacle which has pushed liberation-education tensions to the limit, he described a critical role for the facul-

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ty in engaging in debate over the legal and constitutional reconstruction of South Africa in line with "the debate going on in the liberation movement. We are seriously considering the practical implications as far as the law is concerned".

He also voiced reservations then about student boycotts. "At one stage boycotts were really necessary," Van Rensburg said, "they were the only effective strategy that the students had, and they succeeded in bringing about major changes which were absolutely necessary. But now, something of a boycott

syndrome has developed."

Hein Willemse, senior lecturer in Afrikaans and a respected writer and political thinker among activists in the Western Cape, described the benefits of boycott against a broad canvas. "We need to look at the politics of refusal as something often very positive, they offer an important historical alternative to violence".

The Afrikaans department in which Willemse teaches is one of the largest at UWC, with over 2 000 undergraduates. One of his colleagues, Professor Ampie Coetzee, left a prestigious post at Wits to join the department because "this university is a pointer to what future universities in South Africa are going to be. Literature and language are not separate from politics, especially Afrikaans, and here they are even more intertwined.

"Afrikaans is associated with the State, the police, the Boere - but here it is a different language. Traditional Afrikaners will not be able to grasp this. If white Afrikaans is the language of the bourgeoisie, here it's the language of the proletariat.

"Apartheid has backfired at UWC," Coetzee remarks. But whether UWC has achieved more than turning the tables on apartheid, whether it has managed to become the model of a post-apartheid university, is a matter of opinion.

Dr Neville Alexander, controversial western Cape political figure, former Cape director of the SA College for Higher Education and a leading light in the National Forum coalition, criticised Professor Gervel for creating radicalism's very own "political-philosophical Bantustan" at a UWC seminar.

"The whole thrust," he argued, "is to place the university above and outside the arena of the class struggle. It is an attempt, *de facto*, to institutionalise and thus to co-opt the militancy of many students and some staff and the radical challenges to the university itself. This is the only meaning which an "intellectual home of the left" can have within an apartheid society.

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"Ja, this intellectual home of the left thing," says Ampie Coetzee, "for me, that means not having to explain why I want to teach literature from a Marxist paradigm, it saves me a lot of energy. The point is that this will be the university which is ready for the transformation to a post-apartheid society. Obviously, the transformation of the university itself cannot take place completely under apartheid."

Hein Willemse believes "this intellectual home of the left concept is a contradictory term. Those of us who have a leftist persuasion would say that you cannot simply have this wonderful paradise *sommer so*, just like that. But what is important is the image, it may be salesmanship, but it is a sign of the intentions of this university. We are saying that we are working towards a post-apartheid university in a post-apartheid society, and that almost Utopian ideal is very bloody important."

While the debate on UWC's relevance to the class struggle rages on, not only are students coming into the university from working class families, many of the graduates are going back into the community, into predominantly working class schools as teachers.

The dean of the faculty entrusted with turning out teachers, Professor Owen van den Berg, sees the university playing a significant role here: "As a faculty we take seriously the processes which are exemplified by people's education. We are constantly looking at the possibility of education in service of a democratic society."

Are there any recidivist whites in the woodpile? I searched hard for a throwback to the "Bush" days, but found none who would commit themselves in print. There were some strong comments made, but always with the rider, "don't use my name".

One such told me "it is all very well to talk of intellectual homes for the left, but what about those of us trying to do an honest day's work who don't give a damn about ideology? We are shouted down in the tea rooms, there is no such thing as free speech on this campus. The left rules, and if they need to rule by the power of the mob, then they will do that."

One public figure who has spoken out and who is still on the payroll but no longer on campus, is Professor Georges Delpierre, sometime head of the biochemistry department. In a highly publicised spat with the university, UWC attempted to have him disciplined after he allegedly threatened to call the police to uphold discipline and "restore law and order" on campus. He is also alleged to have carried a gun into lectures for self-defence after his office was sacked by students and gutted by fire.

In his affidavit to the Cape Supreme Court seeking a restraining order against UWC's attempt to have him "disciplined", he made no bones about his views on the direction in which professors Gerwel and Durand were leading the institution:

"It is quite clear that the sympathies of the rector, Professor Gerwel, and the vice-rector, Professor Durand . . . lie with the radical elements, are pro-African National Congress, and are content to allow communist-type slogans to be bandied about."

Less controversial are the views of academics who have been on campus for years and who do not hold strong political views - at least not publicly. Professor Benjamin Esterhuizen, dean of science, is critical of student boycotts because of the disruption of studies but says: "I have to admit, if it wasn't for those boycotts, UWC would probably not be where it is today".

Like Ampie Coetzee and Owen van den Berg, Esterhuizen sees the cycle of education and training of teachers as a prime function of his department. "The cycle can only get better," he predicts, "it will probably take a generation before we have pupils leaving school with the benefit of UWC trained teachers, but that day is coming."

The debate around UWC itself is only

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just beginning. There are no easy solutions. It is a tough university going through tough times which are going to get tougher. Budget cuts, the rapid growth which brings problems like "squatting" in residences, the racial cauldron produced by throwing together large groups of "coloured", African and white students and staff has caused difficulties. The university sees this as part of its growing pains, its process of desocialisation. Negative headlines, State threats to the subsidy, the shifting ground of the broader political debate in which the left currently finds itself tactically becalmed and lacking in the clear sense of liberatory direction that previously made for such a heady atmosphere at UWC, all combine in a tension which is explosive. But it remains potentially creative, precisely because the university stubbornly positions itself as part of a new society it is determined will come to pass.

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