On April 14, 1980, Coloured (mixed race) students in Cape Town initiated a boycott of their schools which grew to involve more than 100,000 people throughout South Africa and evoked powerful memories of the Soweto boycott of 1976. The 1976 student revolt left as many as 1,000 people dead, and continued to flare over a period of 18 months. In both cases, the poor quality of education for blacks sparked the protest.

The April boycott was instigated by Coloured students who quickly won the support of their teachers and parents. The boycott also won some support from Indian and African students, and like the 1976 protest, the target moved from educational issues to become an attack on the entire apartheid system. In 1989, as in 1976, the South African government demonstrated its intolerance of dissent by responding to non-violent protesters with tear gas, riot sticks, and arrest. So far, just two people have been reported to have died in connection with the boycott. Clearly the 1976 deaths, only four years in the past, have influenced all sides in the new outbreak of dissent.

The Coloureds of South Africa are defined by South African law as people of mixed race. Numbering about 2.4 million, most of them live in Cape Province, the region where African people first came into contact with European settlers after 1652. They occupy a nebulous position within South Africa, torn between White and African society. The South African government has used this situation to its advantage, granting a few more privileges and somewhat higher wages to Coloureds than to Africans, seeking to foster disunity between the two groups.

The effort to keep the Coloureds docile in their superior position to Africans has failed, and the Coloured community has suffered a sense of profound isolation. In 1976, the Theron Commission was set up by the government to determine the future of the Coloureds. It recommended a series of economic and social remedies, but stopped short of advocating full political equality. The Soweto rebellion exploded the same year, and the commission's findings were never acted upon.

In 1978 and 1979, the South African Government again negotiated with the Coloured community in an attempt to win its allegiance in the post-Soweto political period. Negotiations were held with the Coloured Representative Council, a government-created body set up in 1959 which enjoyed only advisory powers. In these negotiations, the more militant members of the CRC pushed for reforms that would have required a restructuring of South African society and the dismantling of apartheid. The South African government's predictable rejection of such demands led to an impasse in late 1979, and the CRC was dissolved. At the last of the meetings, when pressed on the issue of equal suffrage for Coloureds, Prime Minister P. W. Botha declared, "One man, one vote is out, that is to say, never!"
Politically sophisticated students had understood all along that the CRC had no real power. Its dissolution only proved to them that the apartheid regime was not even willing to deal with "cooperative" members of the Coloured community. Increasingly, these students understood that their future lay with those who had protested in Soweto, that there was a black identity joining Coloureds, Africans, and Indians in a common struggle.

This is the background to the April student boycott. The focus was the deteriorating educational system, where overcrowded class rooms and outdated textbooks are the rule. Every year the government spends $900 for each white student, and $300 for each Coloured student. Only 6 percent of Coloured students enter secondary school and as few as 1 percent reach the final year.

In the Hanover Park area outside Cape Town, meetings of students, parents, and teachers were held in late March. Complaints about school fees, requirements that students wear uniforms (an economic burden), intimidation of students, and the dismissal without reason of three teachers were heard. Discontent grew and on April 14 the school boycott began and quickly spread to the other Coloured schools in the Cape and throughout South Africa. The basic demand of the protestors was for the South African government to abolish the ethnically based educational system, replacing it with a unitary system that would give equal education to all.

By the end of the first week, an estimated 50,000 students were involved in the protest and the government began to crack down. On April 22, the police used tear gas and riot sticks to break up a peaceful march of 8,000 students in Cape Town, and similar police action was taken against smaller demonstrations in Durban and Johannesburg.

The protest continued to grow nevertheless. The worst conflict with the police came on April 29 when more than 600 students were arrested after the police stormed a closed meeting of 2,000 in Johannesburg. Before the order to disperse could be obeyed, the arrests were made and the students charged with attending an illegal meeting. By this time more than an estimated 100,000 people were involved and the protest was no longer confined to the Coloured community.

While Indian students began to protest in solidarity with the Coloureds, the impact of the action began to be felt in the Indian community itself. Again, the inferior quality of education for Indians was the issue and both parents and students were involved. Significantly, the protest spread throughout the Indian community including traditionally conservative areas.

In the African community, protests erupted in Mamelodi outside Pretoria and in Kwaliashu outside Durban. The first death related to the protests was reported from Port Elizabeth. There an adult was stoned to death after attempting to persuade some 2,000 protesting students from the Andre Moyake school to return to class. African college students, first at the University College of the North, and then at the University of Fort Hare, clashed with police as they demonstrated in solidarity with the Coloured boycott. On May 13, the second death occurred when a policeman shot a black man at a student rally in the Durban area.
Although slow in initial mobilization, African support for the boycott has been crucial in keeping it alive. Prime Minister Botha, clearly wanting to avoid a repeat of the violence of 1976, met with a Coloured delegation in early May. He admitted that there were legitimate grievances and promised to set up a commission to look into them. Following this meeting, there were predictions that the boycott was waning and would soon be over.

It was after this meeting that the students at Fort Hare acted, causing the university to be closed for the first time since 1976. Coloureds took to the streets again, in support of the African protest and momentum grew. On May 24, 3,000 Coloureds marched in central Cape Town and were brutally dispersed by police. 103 were arrested.

Two days later, 53 church leaders were arrested in Johannesburg as they marched to protest the detention of the Rev. John Thorne, a Coloured minister who had given public support to the boycott. The marchers were halted in central Johannesburg by policemen with automatic rifles and attack dogs. Among those detained were Bishop Desmond Tutu and Mrs. Leah Tutu, his wife. The Bishop is General Secretary of the South Africa Council of Churches. Only a few days before, he had warned that tension among the residents of Soweto was mounting to the point it had reached in 1975. The church leaders were held overnight and charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act for infringing a ban on unauthorized open air gatherings that was imposed by the government after the 1975 protests.

June 16, the anniversary of the beginning of the 1976 boycott is approaching. The government is worried because student unrest is being compounded by the major strike wave which has been growing all year, and which most recently involves African workers in textile factories in Durban and meat industry workers in Cape Town. Out of fear that unrest would continue to build toward June 16, the government appears to have made a decision to crack down now. Police Minister Louis le Grange has stated that it is "a question of so far and no further."

Blacks too look toward June 16. The "astounding degree of unity, solidarity, and discipline" among Coloured students, teachers and parents will not be bought off by government promises. Further, lessons were learned from the 1976 action. In order to avoid the elimination of leadership by death, detention, and exile as happened in 1976, there was an effort this time to keep leadership hidden and collective. The inclusion of workers as well as students in the general unrest is a new and significant development.

For some, the lesson of Soweto was that guerrilla warfare, not non-violent protest, is the appropriate strategy for the future. Others are moving to this position now. No one can predict a time table of events, but the Coloured boycott has become one more significant battle in the long war that South African blacks are waging against apartheid, a war that will only end when the entire system is dismantled.

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