

# South Africa: Lest we forget - The student upsurge, past and present violence

Thursday 10 December 2015, by [LEHMANN Uta](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2015).

How often I have heard colleagues and friends in the past few days and weeks talk about the 1970s and 80s. About how there was more structure, less confusion, less destruction and violence, more discipline. Deeply worried and disturbed about developments these conversations have led me to reflect. Was there really less violence? More discipline? More heroism?

For sure there was more certainty about the role and illegitimacy of the state at that time. But I would suggest that if we move out of the immediate trauma of the past weeks and wipe the benevolent haze of history from our glasses, we will remember that those years were no less traumatic, messy, sometimes incomprehensible.

Who can forget the townships burning, schools set alight, those of us who were teachers worrying about the safety of our students, hiding them, having to figure out how to stand by them and support them? Or, for those of us a bit younger than I am, being the student activists who were in the midst of it all.

A colleague reminded me the other day that in 1985 the rallying call was “liberation before education”, fully supported if not instructed by the organization that now presides over a police force that brutalizes students and workers. The goal was quite explicitly to destabilise the country. Those were difficult times, full of tensions and contradictions; not for weeks, but for many years.

To be sure, there were many (and I was one of them) who considered the call “liberation before education” dangerous and counter-productive. And within and out of turbulence, sometimes chaos, lots of debate and grappling, grew structures, discipline, amazing creativity and constructive energy (such as the concept and practice of ‘each one teach one’, grassroots study groups). The (oh so imperfect) transformation, the energy and work we remember now, which was formative for so many of us, emerged out of a lot of uncertainty, hard work, and over time.

I in no way condone violence and intimidation, particularly not if directed at fellow students and other persons. But let us be very clear: in the many, often contradictory narratives there is plenty of evidence that police and particularly private security have played a substantial role to accelerate tension, to goad students, to act unnecessarily brutally. Culpability is certainly shared.

Let us also be clear that violence comes in many forms and guises: the obvious physical violence so visible on our campuses now; but also many much more insidious forms of structural violence that play out in so many ways in our students’ (and workers’) lives.

We have stood by and watched cleaning staff in our institutions receiving abysmal wages over many years; have not been able to address the scandal of having students sit in our lectures hungry or not being able to complete their studies because they lacked money. Not because we did not try, but because our efforts, our arguments have been ineffectual. And now small but substantial groups of students, often the most marginalized in more ways than one, are running out of patience, much like residents in townships in so-called service delivery protests, or school students in the 1980s. They

are learning right now (or think they are learning) that any demand, any request short of burning barricades and all-out destruction, will fall on deaf years. Physical violence to counter structural violence!

The heavy hand (and often outright brutality) of police and particularly private security, paired with leadership that responds far too late and is not trusted, at best deepen mistrust and resentment, and at worst fan the flames of discontent and anger.

I think many of us were caught off-guard by the speed with which things unfolded in the past few weeks (students probably no less so than management and staff). A lot of damage has been done, both physically and emotionally. We, as parents, and as lecturers and management acting in loco parentis, who remember and were active participants in the past 50 years of our history, have a key role to think back, rise above trauma, fear and anger, and think about how to construct engagement and support that will transform our institutions fundamentally.

Our children's movement for free and transformed education is legitimate and important for the future of this country, there is no doubt in my mind. It is up to us to stand by them, to engage and to guide. There is no other option.

**Uta Lehmann**, UWC staff member and mother

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**P.S.**

\* "Lest we forget". From Amanda! - <http://amandla.org.za>  
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