

'Chalk down' in Mozambique

Striking teachers have created a sensation in Mozambique with many people speaking about the "intellectualisation" of the strikes since their beginning in January. Speaking to the heart of the people, this has been the most popular strike so far. PRABHA KHOSLA reports.

The school year began on Friday, February 16 with a strike by teachers in the northern town of Nampula. By Monday teachers were out in Maputo and Quilemane, followed soon by the towns of Beira and Chimoio. Rumours had been circulating for weeks that the teachers would strike with the beginning of the new academic year. They did.

Yet this strike is very different from the others. For one, teachers have a special history in this country. Soon after independence many teachers, mostly Portuguese nationals, fled the country. This created a tremendous vacuum, which undermined the government's policy to make education accessible to all. With an illiteracy rate of more than 95% at independence, the focus was on literacy campaigns and the expansion of all levels of schooling.

Students from the university and pre-university were recruited, given crash courses

in teacher training and sent off to teach in remote areas of the provinces. Living and working conditions were harsh and salaries did not always arrive on time.

In addition to this, because teachers are some of the people in a village who can read and write they ended up doing a lot of other tasks.

Targets of Renamo

As the destabilisation war escalated, teachers became a favourite target of the RENAMO bandits. The provinces abound with stories of teachers under attack, and escaping from RENAMO assaults by walking kilometres and kilometres with their pupils, leaving behind them burnt-out ruins of homes, schools and health posts.

Over the years 500 teachers have been killed or kidnapped, and 6 000 have been made redundant as a result of the destruction of over 2 655 schools. This corre-

sponds to 65% of Mozambique's primary school network.

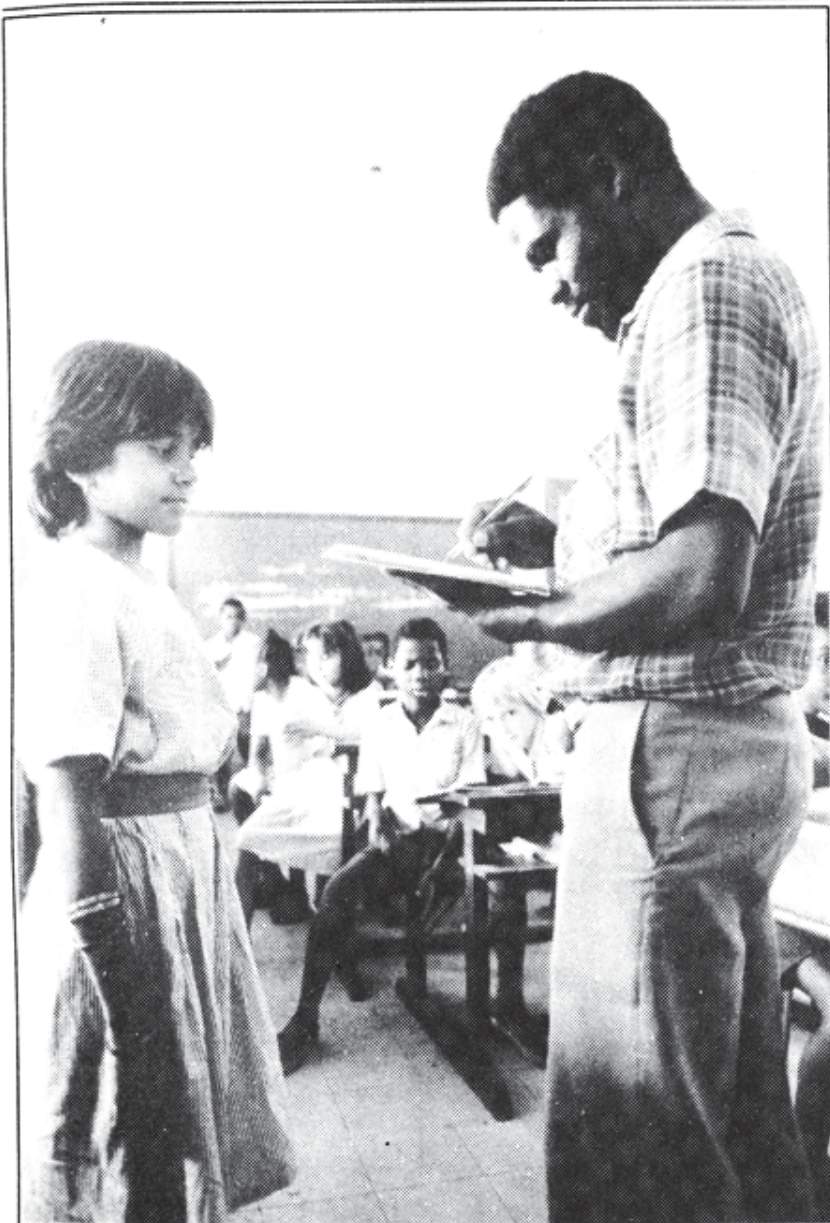
In the provinces of Tete and Zambezia 80% of the schools are not functioning.

Formation of the ONP

The National Teachers Organisation, the ONP, was formed in 1981 by a decision of the Frelimo party. This was the first time in the history of the country that teachers had an organisation of their own.

For most teachers this has been a mixed blessing. Since its formation, the ONP has been closely tied to the Party and more often than not, tied to the Party's agenda and not to the teachers. This caused a fair amount of confusion.

Teachers have not really claimed the ONP as "theirs". Current thinking is that the ONP needs to separate itself from the Party, and create an independent organisation that truly belongs to the teachers. It will then address their spe-



Mozambican school teacher and his pupils: back at school, but not happy.

Photo: Paul Weinberg/Afrapix

cific needs in the broader context of the constraints facing this war-torn country.

With regard to the strike, in September 1989 the ONP informed the Minister of Education, Dr Aniceto dos Muchangos, the Prime Minister Mario Muchungo and the Frelimo Party, that they had certain grievances that they would like to see discussed and addressed. Amongst others these included wage increases, medical assistance,

the re-classification of teachers into the new wage and career structures, and professional development. The deadline given was December 31 and nothing happened by its expiry. In fact, the teachers have been trying to have a meaningful dialogue with their Ministry since 1984, but never to their satisfaction.

There are about 25 000 teachers in the country and about 5 000 Education Minis-

try staff.

Instead, on February 10 the Minister announced a wage hike of 6 000 meticaïs for all those whose wages did not increase by that amount in January when wages went up generally. He also agreed to a bonus for teachers with seniority, retro-active wages for teachers reclassified since 1987, and the completion of the integration of all education personnel into the new system by the end of the year.

However, this was not enough and the strike started six days later. The teachers' demands varied from school to school, even in the same town. Generally speaking the demands included a 100% wage increase with a minimum wage of 75 000 meticaïs per month. (US \$84,26 at current exchange rate; the meticaïs is being devalued regularly), a 100% increase in wages for extra shifts, salaries compatible with those of foreign teachers, incorporation of all teaching staff into the new career and wage scales, etc.

Drop in living standards

As with others, this strike is also the result of a severe drop in the standards of living. Prices have soared and wages have fallen. The South African sponsored destabilisation war has taken a heavy toll. With the implementation of the IMF structural adjustment programme in 1987, the situation has worsened. In classic IMF style, sub-

sidies to food, health and education have been removed, with a greater impact on the urban population. In rural areas teachers can supplement their incomes from their *machambas* - family farms.

The teachers' problem was that they were not well organised. There was an insufficient co-ordination of the strike and its demands. This is a reflection of the weakness of the ONP.

All events need to be planned in the long-term, since Mozambique has a poor communication infrastructure. Normally, phones do not work, the teachers do not have a telex system and mail is highly irregular. Sometimes the only means of communications is VOR, the Voice of Rumours.

Alfredo Mcuacua, a secondary school teacher said, "the strike is doomed because we do not have food". There is no strike fund. All operational costs of the ONP come from the state and membership fees are hardly ever collected. All these elements weakened the strike.

The government for its part has been more severe in dealing with the teachers than other strikers. For one, the Council of Ministers decided to suspend the school year on February 24, effectively locking out the teachers and the students. Neither the Minister of Education nor any other senior member of the Party or the State met with the teachers as a group. For many tea-

chers this is a sign of disrespect, as the country has a culture of the Party 'talking with the people'.

To top it off, on March 1, when Maputo teachers went on a spontaneous march after a mass meeting, riot police were sent out to disperse the peaceful demonstration. Six teachers and five members of the public were injured. Street talk was of total disbelief that the government could send riot police to beat up the teachers.

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The only meetings with government leaders were with the "ad hoc" Commission set up by striking teachers with some members of the ONP executive.

Strikers return to work defeated

In fact the teachers did not "win" this round and a majority of their demands have not been met. The government announced that the school year would begin again on 5 March. Teachers in other parts of the country returned to work, except in Maputo.

In Nampula there was no teaching in the first day as teachers spent the whole day explaining to students why

they had struck. Similar discussions took place in other towns. Finally, on 7 March, sixteen days after they had walked out, Maputo teachers went back to school, unhappy and dissatisfied.

They issued a communique saying:

- without a feeling of defeat, but because of a feeling for the children, the teachers had decided to return to school
- that the "ad hoc" Commission would continue in the hope to better the working and living conditions of the teachers
- that the teachers vehemently repudiate the contempt and physical violence that has been targeted against them.

So what lies ahead? Mario Souto, the Secretary for International Affairs of the ONP says,

"It all depends on what happens in the next few months. We have to see whether teachers will organise to create another organisation for themselves or organise to change the ONP, and thus build an organisation that is truly theirs and will speak in their voice".

As usual, Voice of Rumours is busy transmitting. This time announcing that the teachers are unhappy. They will work somewhat for now, but in a few months when they are better organised they will strike again. ☆