



#FeesMustFall ? South African students fight for free education

Jeremy Dewar, Red Flag No 8 Tue, 01/11/2016 - 09:13

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South Africa's student movement has closed down many of the country's universities for nearly a month now in their campaign to abolish fees.

In one of the world's most unequal societies, the battle encapsulates the frustrations and anger of the vast majority of black people, who still face poverty, unemployment and exclusion, despite the fall of apartheid over 20 years ago.

Many headlines around the world have focused on violent confrontations between protesters and the police. However, it is the state forces who have upped the ante, deploying tear gas, plastic bullets, water cannon and stun grenades against the students.

Courageously, the students have fought back, often with bricks and sticks, stones and bins, but occasionally with a form of dirty protest, symbolically hurling human excrement at their tormentors. At the University of KwaZulu Natal, the law library was torched.

University authorities have also weighed in, banning demos and meetings, suspending and expelling student leaders. Police arrests have escalated recently in an attempt to decapitate the movement.

ANC attempts compromise

On 26 October, the students took their protest to parliament in Cape Town, where finance minister (and ex-Marxist) Pravin Gordhan was delivering his mini-budget.

Outside the building, police meted out their usual cocktail of violence to protesters but, inside, Gordhan had to concede a 10.9 percent increase in university funding and an 18.5 percent hike in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), spread over three years.

While these figures look impressive and extra spending totals 17 billion rand (£1 billion), it will not solve the crisis and is unlikely to demobilise the movement.

The threshold for NSFAS remains too high, most students can neither afford the fees of some 40,000 rand (£2,500) a year nor qualify for state support. This may be affordable for white families, whose average annual income is 365,000 rand (£26,000), but for black families on an average 60,000 rand (£3,500), it's impossible. And this is a country with 30 percent unemployment, rising to 47 percent among young people.

The system, even if it is aimed at accommodating the black middle class, will only further entrench racist divisions and ghettoise the black working class.

FMF wants the total abolition of the fees system, free education for all. It wants a major overhaul of primary and secondary education, which is keeping back young black and working class people. And it wants the 'decolonisation' of the education system, which still stubbornly teaches to a curriculum and ethos of apartheid-era South Africa and Western imperialism.

Growth of the movement

Although South Africa's students hit the headlines 18 months ago, when they tore down a statue of Cecil Rhodes, the architect of apartheid, at the University of Cape Town, it was last October's proposed 10.9 percent increase in fees that led to a mass movement. After weeks of mass protest and violent clashes with the police, Blade Nzimande, the ruling ANC's minister for higher education, and South African Communist Party general secretary, climbed down. First he offered a 6 percent hike, then, after further protests, agreed to cancel the increase altogether.

But this was only a temporary respite. New fee rises were introduced again in 2016.

A further gain of the 2015 movement came from the students' alliance with low-paid, privatised university workers, like cleaners and caterers. Here, the movement demanded, and won, not only wage rises between 200-300 percent, but also the return of services in-house. With university contracts, jobs were also more secure. No wonder the student movement has been emboldened and radicalised further!

Way forward

It is in this direction – towards the working class – that the movement must now steer if it is to make further gains.

The ANC has, to some extent, succeeded in peeling off some FMF support from the middle class and university lecturers, who complain about its 'impossible' demands; one professor even likened it to Boko Haram. But there remain plenty of allies in the working class movement itself.

After more than two decades in power, the ANC government is mired in crisis. President Jacob Zuma is deeply unpopular and faces more than 780 corruption charges against him personally. The party also suffered terrible defeats in August's local elections, where its support fell from 54 to 46 percent, largely through the abstention of black working class voters; for the first time since apartheid, the turnout fell below 60 percent.

The main beneficiary was the Democratic Alliance (DA), which is at least as neoliberal and pro-big business, but the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) of Julius Malema won 8 percent. The EFF poses to the left of the ANC but is opportunist and unprincipled. In Tshwana (formerly Pretoria) and Johannesburg, where the EFF held the balance of power on the councils, it supported the DA against the ANC in mayoral elections.

Nevertheless, the EFF is a growing force and many of its activists play an important role in the anti-austerity movement and the unions.

The union movement is also currently split, with Cosatu having expelled its largest and founding affiliate, the metal workers' NUMSA. Despite this, South Africa's unions are among the most militant in the world; last year the gold miners fought a heroic five-month battle against cuts and closures.

On top of this, there are also many social movements against cuts, exclusion, corruption and price rises. The police estimate that there were 3,300 violent clashes with protest movements and strikers last year: that is, nine a day.

NUMSA, which plays the role of a vanguard union in South Africa, has openly called for, and claims to be preparing to found, a workers' party. If and when it does, the students organised around FMF must play an active and leading role within it.

Only by cementing their alliance with the working class as a whole in a new party that can sweep away the ANC and the openly bourgeois Democratic Alliance, can the students win their demands for free education for all and an egalitarian, anti-colonial and socialist society.

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