

Class Rule Must Fall!

More Statues, More Working Class

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Slogans like “Erase Rhodes”, “Rhodes so White,” and Rhodes must Fall,” emerging from student groups at South Africa’s elite universities, recently monopolised social media. These have taken off, because South Africa is in need of great structural change; 20 years after the important 1994 transition, many black people remain trapped in oppressive conditions.

No one would deny that during apartheid blacks, Coloureds and Indians were racially oppressed, abused, and as workers, exploited. If removing statues and changing place names can help solve the problems, and form part of a meaningful redress of past and present injustices, then such actions must be supported.

But can such demands really do so?

Symbols and Substance

At a symbolic level, statue and name changes might provide some measure of comfort to those who have suffered. But it also appears that very few in these movements want to address the deeper problems, the oppression of the largely black working class – the majority, whose cheap labour lays the foundation for the wealth and power of the few. (By working class, I mean the group of people who do not have ownership or command over the means of “administration, coercion or production,” in line with the anarchist definition).

The exclusion of most (working class) blacks, Coloured and Indians from expensive, elitist universities cannot be tackled without tackling the hostile class structure, which is propped up by a dismal township schooling system, massive poverty and unemployment, low wages and rising prices, and the long shadow of the apartheid past.

This situation cannot be removed with cosmetic and symbolic changes. Renaming varsities and changing curricula in a few social science and philosophy areas would not address this mass exclusion, and it would not change the basically elitist nature of the system.

Black Working Class

It is easy to assert that, for example, Rhodes University, in Grahamstown, is “so white”, or a bastion of “white privilege,” focussing exclusively on racial inequality.

Of course, racial prejudice and discrimination and the apartheid legacy are real and must be tackled. But when the problem is reduced to the attitudes of a few whites in the universities, or to curricula or to symbols, we end up ignoring the larger class gulf in the society. Partly this is a factor of the class nature of these movements, which are built largely on the tiny layers of students at elite universities – white and black – often from upper class backgrounds and schools. As a result, a blind eye has been turned to the neo-liberal policy model aiming to cut spending and to make universities profitable.

Arguing for stressing class does not mean ignoring race, as some claim. It is very evident that the race and class you are born in still matters in South Africa: being black and working class opens you up, undefended, to a world of pain, as you are forced to withstand both class and racial oppression, only to simply reproduce yourself in that same exact position. How can the best-paid black rock-face miner, earning R12 500 monthly after bitter strikes, send his children to university education costing R150 000 for fees alone?

Empire Strikes Back

Cecil John Rhodes (1853–1902) was a late 19th century imperialist and mining capitalist, whose policies translated directly into the British wars in the areas now called Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe (formerly “Rhodesia”) and South Africa.

The British Empire was racist, but its actions were shaped by the capitalist and state drive for profit and power – not an abstract drive to racial power. It crushed anyone in its way, including whites like the Irish, using whatever forces were available, including large numbers of black troops.

Colonel Graham (namesake of “Grahamstown”) used such troops in the frontier wars, just as the British Empire actively used African chiefs and kings for its rule. The same men, Rhodes and LS Jameson, who drove the wars in “Rhodesia,” drove the wars on the Boer republics; the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) saw more than 26 000 white Afrikaner women and children, and around 12 000 blacks, die in British concentration camps.

If Rhodes’ statue at the University of Cape Town (UCT), or his name at Rhodes University, must go, it is surely not simply because it is a statue of a white man; but that of an imperial master and symbol of the capitalist system. That, I argue, is the real enemy – in Rhodes’ time and still today.

This system thrives on exploited black workers, then and now. The new South African black political elite works actively, in complicit partnership with white capitalists, to perpetuate the same system.

Colour and Class

In 2015 the enemy isn’t remotely “everything white;” not in South Africa. Certainly, the colonial and apartheid hangover still shapes much of our reality, in which many white people still benefit from the apartheid legacy, not least in terms of apartheid investments in white education. And it cannot be denied that poverty and inequality in the new South Africa to an important extent follows old apartheid lines, in that the majority of the poor and unemployed and low-waged are black and Coloured and Indian.

But in 2015, the enemy is not some white university kids. It is a system of class rule, where the “white master” – more correctly, the “minority in the minority,” the small capitalist sector of the white population – is joined by the equally vicious black master – an equally small minority in the black majority.

Black Masters

In today’s South Africa, the black elite is directly part of the system of oppression, and involved in corrupt deals with white capitalists. It is the black-led state that, through its police and municipalities and departments, sees to it that South African working class and poor black people are mistreated and killed – mainly by other black people. Today, South Africa has become a hostile environment for working class black foreigners, whose life span is determined by how fast they can run.

South Africa should not narrowly fight against only racial inequalities, but broaden this into a fight for true transformation that confronts class privilege, which cuts across race and puts a (multi-racial) ruling class in charge. This is the complicated reality that a stress on the historical differences between blacks and whites can't really explain.

Without this working class perspective – working class first! – campaigns of vandalising statues and changing institution names to black names becomes a well-crafted distraction to the real problem, hiding the black elite and its guilt from view.

More Working Class

Indeed, talking of name changes, why even replace those of white political and economic elites, with those of black political and economic elites? Sol T. Plaatje, whose name is now given to the new Northern Cape university, was a great intellectual and ANC leader – but he was also a strong supporter of the British Empire and the British in the Anglo-Boer War, and had close relations with De Beers, the company Rhodes founded.

More broadly, why should nationalists – like Plaatje – whose pro-capitalist, pro-statist political agenda, which took South Africa into its dead-end, whose agenda derailed the struggle for a radical socialist outcome in the country, keep being suggested as namesakes for universities and other institutions?

A true symbolism that represents the majority should be leftist, and represent the working class – that is multi-racial. Why are revolutionary working class giants like Josie Mpama, Elijah Baraji, Clements Kadalie, Albert Nzula, Bill Andrews, T.W. Thibedi, S.P. Bunting, Andrew Dunbar, B.L.E. Sigamoney etc. forgotten, in favour the leaders of the heroes of the failed nationalist currents, not just the ANC, but its Africanist and BC rivals?

We need a left/ working class iconography. Statues are part of our shared heritage – good and bad. They are also reminders of past evils. History can't be erased. Rather than removing the old ones, we need to build new ones: but ones that are more working class, which recall a history worth celebrating. Let us rather have working class figures tower over the monuments of past horrors, balancing the score, as part of the struggle for working class power.

University Elitism

Universities themselves serve as factory lines for the perpetuation of class systems; those privileged enough to study further use this to maintain the class position that they have, or use it to break into a higher class through acquiring rare skills and higher income.

Universities as currently constituted are elite institutions, regardless of the names. They are funded by the state and by fees, pushed by the state, corporations and capitalist foundations (including that of Rhodes), to adopt certain priorities. Ever rising fees, including fees that openly discriminate against non-South Africans, and close the doors of learning and culture to the great majority, are part of neo-liberal cuts. Labour relations and wages for most campus workers are shocking.

Really changing this situation, winning a victory for the working class, means transforming institutions like universities, and the larger society, into uplifting pillars for the working class.

This requires working class struggle, which requires unity. The issues may seem simply a race issue, but at the core, it's both race and class. Hence, I ask, "what about the working class"?

Capital and the state win immediately when there is division, and so true transformation cannot be birthed from something dipped in hatred. This is unfortunately a key element within the "Rhodes Must Fall" campaigning, with people from all sides engaging in the most vicious and racially-charged attack. No substantial transformation can come out of this if the intention is not pure. The moment you add a drop of intolerance to any movement, you have corrupted its very roots, and begun a long journey towards failure and destruction.

Deep Transformation

The means and tools to bring about real social transformation must be carefully thought about. What I am arguing here is that the system is the problem. Transformation involves a fight for: free and equal education (including university education), a massive expansion and upgrading of education, ending outsourcing on campuses, promoting genuinely scientific including social scientific work, and fighting for larger social change.

So, let us think of a "workers and peoples scientific university" rather than in terms of an "African university" or a "world-class university" as part of a larger struggle for anarchist transformation – a radical change of society towards self-management, democracy from below, participatory planning and an end to class rule, and social and economic equality.

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