

Worker-Student Alliances

Anarchist Approach Needed

Leroy Maisiri

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After 20 years of neo-liberal democracy, South Africa has not truly begun the much-needed purge of race and class structural inequalities and constraints inherited from apartheid South Africa. Many university campuses across the country, since 2015, have been set alight by the actions of a non-compromising body of students. This political wildfire has moved from campus to campus, for a range of reasons: one thing remains central, that tomorrow's future is shaped by today's youth, restlessly tackling the structures and impediments that stand in their way.

But what is missing however is a working-class focus and an anarchist/ syndicalist approach, a lesson well-taught by the "people's power" and "workers' control" initiatives in radical sector of the 1980s anti-apartheid movement.

Bursaries and "decolonisation"

Earlier in 2015, before and during academic registrations, the Tshwane University of Technology and Walter Sisulu University faced protests around student funding (Makoni, 2015), as did the University of the Witwatersrand, around problems in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (Bolowana & Pillay, 2015). At the University of Cape Town (UCT), by contrast, demands centred on racial justice, framed as "decolonisation," with controversy around a Cecil John Rhodes statue tied to bigger transformation issues (News24, 2015). These struggles sparked protests and a weeks-long occupation of administration buildings at Rhodes University (Maisiri, 2015). Followed by the "open Stellenbosch" protests raised racism and language issues (Petersen, 2015). And most recently the rape protests.

Learning from 1976, 1984

But, as shown in the 1976 revolts, where black students led a fight against racism and exclusion, and the narrow opportunities to those from black working class homes (Maponyane, 2014), students have limited power. The 1976 revolt, and the big battles of the 1980s, showed the need to move from separate struggles, into involving the organised working class, to fight against all forms of oppression and a radical transformation of the whole society (The Worker-Tenant, 1984: 29). By "working class", I mean the term as defined by anarchists: those who, not owning or controlling means of administration, coercion or production, work for those who control such means. This includes workers plus their families including the unemployed.

Neo-liberalism

It also requires locating struggles against racial injustice in fights against neo-liberalism, Universities are increasingly turned into another arm of capitalistic accumulation, designed to exploit to take more than they give. Ever-rising fees make lecture theatres fortresses of privatised knowledge, entry being completely dependent on the class into which you are born, the education you can afford. Facilities are staffed by armies of precarious, contract and outsourced workers, struggling to survive and excluded from university education.

The major victim of the neo-liberal restructuring of the university is the black working class, both working class students and campus workers. There is a direct capitalist and state attack on the working class, not clearly captured by "decolonisation" discourse. In "Class Rule Must Fall!"

More Statues, More Working Class” (Maisiri, 2015), I point out that universities play a leading role in the continued existence of class system, producing and reproducing privileged classes.

Class struggle and classrooms

Therefore, the campus space is an arena where the class system and class question must be confronted. The question then becomes: how?

First, student protests must develop a strategy linked to the working class. But this, as in 1976 and 1983, must involve a much more accurate critique of the enemy. In the 1980s, this meant locating the fight against racist education in a fight against the apartheid state and racial-capitalism, including the peripheral Fordist system. This also means understanding the problems cannot be solved by symbolic changes, or changing the composition of elite classes – it requires removing the class system, and a new, libertarian, self-managed socialist order.

This analysis must be carried over to the black-led state of the African National Congress (ANC), whose neo-liberal policies, capitalism and elite enrichment. In “Who Rules South Africa” (2013:4), [Lucien] van der Walt argues that the current state is in fact “an obstacle to the full [national and class] emancipation of the working class.” This state is protected by nationalist ideology, which denies the class question and which cannot – as clearly shown in twenty years – solve the social problems. This is quite evident in the way the ruling party pushed back the responsibility of free education back to the universities washing its hands clean of a problem, a problem that is structurally rooted in Neo Liberal policies.

Working class names, symbols

Renaming universities after nationalists is problematic, as nationalism has helped take us into the current crisis, and as nationalists have a “pro-capitalist, pro-statist political agenda”, (Maisiri, 2015). Rather this paper argues for a left/working class iconography: in placing the working class at the forefront to forge a new path, and moving off the nationalist dead-end, let us make working class symbols and ideas and struggles central to transformation.

Conclusion

Agitate for a “workers’ and peoples’ scientific university,” not a capitalist or nationalist one. It is not enough to protest about fees and statues and curricula unless we fight the framework defended by a state that sends black working class police men to kill black miners. We must take from the play book of the 1980’s and organise for a worker student alliance. The universities seem to be taking their cues from old regimes relying on police and interdicts. We must then push back against all forms of oppression, a worker student alliance against outsourcing, privatisation of education and against the bureaucratic hand that stretches all the way back to the shoulders of the state.

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