

What ideas do the youth need?

There is renewed interest in black nationalist ideas among black youth, especially university students. This interest is driven by the glaring racial inequalities in society which the campuses give a concentrated experience of.

Executive Committee

Although black student numbers have increased, the high cost of university and the inadequacy of NSFAS loans to poor students mean that many, who often come from poorer backgrounds, are disadvantaged. Poverty brings inferior accommodation, access to transport, books, printing and other resources. Even not having enough money to socialise, party, and relax is a disadvantage.

The dominance of languages of European origin further disadvantages many black students. Historically white universities in particular are still white-dominated at senior managerial and academic level. The curriculum, culture and identity of these universities inflames a sense of black exclusion. The burden of restricted access, debt and high drop-out-rates overwhelmingly affects black students.

Whilst many white students are consciously anti-racist, others show little solidarity, support or even sympathy creating the understandable feeling that “whites don’t care about us”. A minority turn racism into an organised force in reactionary groups such as Afriforum. But if some whites are retreating into a racist laager, they are doing so not in defence of apartheid-style white domination which they know has been defeated never to return. Their racism, awful as it is, is an expression of fear of losing diminishing privileges that the ANC’s neo-liberal policies and corruption threaten, just as the ANC’s policies have plunged millions more black people into poverty.

Without the correct programme to unite students of all backgrounds in struggle, all of the material is present for racial tension and conflict on the campuses.

A developing consciousness

Racial domination and class exploitation have an intertwined history in South Africa. The former served as an indispensable weapon so that capitalism could profit from land dispossession, colonisation



“There can be no capitalism without racism.”
- Malcolm X

and the exploitation of the black working class. But the preservation of capitalism was at the heart of the compromise reached by the ANC in the negotiated settlement with the apartheid regime. This inevitably meant the preservation of the privileges enjoyed by white society, albeit unequally across the classes into which white society is itself divided.

For many black students, turning to nationalist ideas is understandable and reflects a genuine search for a way to fight against racism and inequality. Especially amongst working class students an attraction to nationalism often reflects a rejection of the capitalist status quo.

Indeed, there is much in common between Marxists and those nationalists who draw inspiration from the Pan-African ideas of the 1950s-70s colonial revolution. The most radical Pan-Africanists linked the struggle against colonialism and imperialism to the struggle for socialism; they saw the ‘African revolution’ as part of the world socialist revolution; its leaders viewed the ideas of Marxism as crucial to the success of their struggles even if we would differ with them over how Marxism was understood and how liberation struggles were organised. With such Pan-Africanists it is possible to unite in struggle whilst having a meaningful and comradely debate about the relationship between class, race and the struggle for socialism.

Demands for privilege

But these are not the only ideas that march under the banner of nationalism today. A nationalism that stops at the appearance of things, rather than examining their real substance, cannot point in the direction of the thorough social transformation of society. It points instead towards the reproduction of capitalism’s class structure with only a different racial composition particularly at the top. Regardless of the radical nature of the rhetoric, such nationalist ideas are reactionary, anti-working class and anti-poor.

Sections of the black middle class who aspire to a privileged position in society use nationalism as an ideological battering-ram to attack the white middle class’s dominance of better-paid high-status jobs. Their nationalism does not speak for *all* black people but is simply a claim to privileges *for their class*. Some are quite open about this, saying it is the duty of black people to become rich. It means arguing that a “normal” society would have more black billionaires and more white maids. Nationalist ideas that do not aim for socialism and attack Marxism can only be described as *middle class capitalist nationalism*.

Whilst ideologically insignificant, this layer stifles genuine debate, dismissing Marxism as a “white European import” that is “irrelevant to Africa”. Their real objection to Marxism is that it unmasks their elitist class aspirations. They champion anything and everything ‘black’ regardless of the class forces involved. Anti-working class dictators like Robert Mugabe are celebrated, while those attracted to Marxist ideas are labelled “traitors” with “colonised minds”. The reactionary nationalist Andile Mngxitama has even come to the defence of Zuma against the imagined plots of ‘white monopoly capital’. For Mngxitama, simply being a *black* president makes Zuma worthy of defence!

Fuelling the confusion

Middle class capitalist nationalism is reinforced by anti-Marxist academics in the media. Superficial concepts about “the black body”, “black pain” and “the black child” do not provide a scientific understanding of the class origins of racism and inequality. Whereas the “black pain” of working class exploitation can only be eradicated by ending capitalism, that of the middle class is often a cry for privileges that *depend on the continuation of capitalism*.

The lack of class content in these ideas reduces racism and inequality to moral issues separate from the class structure of society. Without a perspective to break with capitalism the liberal white middle class has no solution to racism beyond begging those guilty of it to “think long and hard about their thoughts and actions”. The black middle class either joins this chorus or emphasises white ‘collective guilt’ passed down the generations for which historical reparations must be paid in the form of shared privileges in capitalist society. From different standpoints, *but of the same class*, these ideas defend middle class privilege *in general* by down-playing or ignoring the root of racism in the same class inequalities from which middle class privilege derives.

The working class & nationalism

Campus nationalism is too abstract to impact significantly on the black working class. It offers no way forward in the struggle for higher wages and better conditions. Workers on the factory floor will not feel the burden of class exploitation less because their manager is black, likewise with profiteering shareholders.

Although the national liberation of the black majority topped the agenda of the anti-apartheid struggle, it is a serious misunderstanding to reduce that history to a simple case of black vs. white. The majority of black ‘homeland’ leaders, many black police and informers, and some African capitalist states, supported the white-minority regime. The working class drew lines of division in the struggle against apartheid based overwhelmingly on class because nationalism could not distinguish friend from foe.

In the workplace, black workers experienced national oppression simultaneously as class exploitation. From the struggle for higher wages and improved living standards they drew the conclusion that the struggle against apartheid was simultaneously against capitalism. Both were defended by the same state machine. Socialism thus became the dominant idea in organised black working class consciousness from the 1980s. But nationalism demanded that the working class dilute their class demands to accommodate blacks opposed to apartheid but not to capitalism.

Today, the black ANC government defends the right of capitalists to exploit workers. Their neo-liberal policies guarantee unemployment, inequality and poverty for the black majority whilst BEE policies enrich a small black capitalist class. ‘Tenderpreneurs’ are amongst the most ruthless exploiters. Black political employees in the state stand alongside whites defending capitalism against the working class, as they did at Marikana.

Of course many black workers suffer daily racist abuse at the hands of white bosses. But ultimately nationalism asks the working class to view their white exploiters as *fundamentally different* to their black exploiters. Day-to-day experience tells the working class this is not correct. However, ideas are not immediately put to the test in the same way on campuses as in the workplace. Thus, the limitations of nationalist ideas are not always obvious. Workplace *class* exploitation is outside of most students’ experience. This, and the campus ‘bubble’, helps to disguise the anti-working class agenda behind many nationalist arguments and for the ‘Marxism vs. nationalism’ debate to rumble on in the abstract.

Old debate, new period

Since the working class became the decisive class in society, growth in nationalist ideas has ebbed and flowed with the class

struggle in every generation. In the past, just as today, nationalism emanated overwhelmingly from middle layers in society, often students. For example, the set-backs suffered by the ANC-led defiance campaigns of the 1950s based on mass working class action produced the PAC, led by the more educated and relatively privileged youth. In the 1970s, Black Consciousness (BC) emerged in the universities and for a period was the main challenge to apartheid. But by the early 1980s when the working class became the decisive force in the anti-apartheid struggle BC either swung behind the workers or faded into the background.

Today is no different. The 2012 mass mineworkers’ strikes, those of farm workers in 2013 and the break of the metalworkers’ union Numsa from the ANC which flowed from this, put working class politics and methods of struggle centre stage. But the best traditions of the mineworkers’ struggle were suppressed and the Numsa leadership’s steps towards a new trade union federation and a new workers’ party have been confused and hesitating, slowing the forward march of the heavy battalions of the working class. In turn this has allowed parties like the Economic Freedom Fighters the space to set a nationalist tone to the widespread opposition to the capitalist status quo.

The lessons of history show that *it is first and foremost the absence of a mass working class socialist alternative* that gives space for nationalist ideas to grow. We can say with confidence that they will be cut across in the future by mass working class struggle.

The ebb and flow of mass action on the campuses also impacts on the development of ideas. The nationalism of #RhodesMustFall was pushed to the side by #FeesMustFall as white and black students united in mass struggle against fee increases. After winning a one year fee freeze the mass movement ebbed, demoralising those students who wanted to continue the fight. Unfortunately, this led to impatience and many abandoning the slow methodical work needed to organise and remobilise the mass movement.

The results were acts of isolated violence on some campuses, such as burning buildings. On other campuses, the EFF Student Command and other nationalists tried to manoeuvre black students back into action by misusing legitimate language grievances, polarising and dividing students. Rather than building unity, the slogan #AfrikaansMustFall encouraged racial divisions that the mass #Feesmustfall had begun to overcome.

Ending ‘white privilege’

On the basis of capitalism attempts to end ‘white privilege’ overwhelmingly means a fight between black and white over limited jobs and services. Even if every white in South Africa were “dealt with” as some crude nationalists demand, poverty, inequality and unemployment would remain.

However, under socialism, ‘white privilege’ will be ended not by lowering the living standards of the average white but by massively raising the living standards of the black working class. For Marxists, the answer to ‘white privilege’ is not ‘black privilege’ but *the abolition of privilege* through guaranteed high living standards for all, including a guaranteed job with a living wage and universal free education. Only under socialism and the nationalisation under democratic control of the banks, mines, commercial farms, big factories and big businesses is this possible.

But that does not mean shrugging our shoulders at racism under capitalism today. Wherever racism and discrimination exists, workers and young people must organise to defeat it. But anti-racist campaigns must have a clear programme based on mass working class struggle and link their demands to campaigns to raise living standards and the struggle for a socialist society.

Ending the inequalities in living standards between black and white will end the prejudices that see black skin as inferior. In turn this will end the social conditions that maintain racism and ‘white supremacist’ ideas. *The struggle for socialism is the struggle against racism.*