

6 struggle

The lessons of...

#FeesMustFall

The #FMF movement started in 2015 by successfully resisting a proposed tuition fees increment across universities in SA. However the “second” wave of struggle towards free education, is limping. This arises from various factors.

The three meetings held by #FMF representatives towards the end of 2015, representing over 20 different institutions constitute some of the most progressive since the advent of this liberal capitalist democracy in 1994. But these meetings also had important weaknesses that account for the current state of the movement, the most important of which were on programme and leadership.



Students march to Union Buildings forcing Zuma to announce fee freeze

Trevor Shaku

Programme

A programme is a guide to action – the strategies and tactics to achieve programmatic objectives and the foundation on which a programme of action can be developed. As such, it is always going to be a point of reference in weighing the successes and pitfalls of the #FMF movement, to engage in strategic reflection; to assess progress, learn the lessons of the preceding period, and develop projections for the future.

The purpose of such evaluations cannot simply be to share experiences e.g. anecdotes about clashes with the police. A program can concretise these experiences and give them a meaningful form and translate them into a guide to action in the next confrontation with managements and government.

Despite the fact that the demand for free education enjoys overwhelming support, action in the second wave has focussed on registration, accommodation, racism and language. However, the battles over these questions took on the character of skirmishes between a student minority and management, rather than the mass confrontation as was the case especially during October 2015. The active support of the mass of students had cooled and become passive.

Recognising this, the government tried

to turn the concession forced out of it to its advantage by trying to drive a wedge between the mass and the militant minority, to try to re-establish the authority of the discredit ANC-aligned Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA), and to restore law and order, encouraging management to use force.

In these circumstances the #FMF found itself unable to retain its unity and coherence. #FMF had no clear programme, no democratically controlled-structures, and no recognised democratically elected leadership. In fact it had been argued that the movement was at its most democratic by not having democratic structures, by not having a democratically debated ideological vision, and by not having a democratically decided programme of action. This led to confusion about the way forward.

Without a perspective based on recognition of the relationship between the struggles of students and workers against the government’s neo-liberal capitalist policies and for socialism, #FMF was deprived of the opportunity to achieve ideological clarity and flowing from that, programmatic and organisational cohesion.

Without a coherent programme which guides us into action, the #FMF has been loose, without a nationally coordinated programme. Unfortunately the few inter-provincial meetings/national meetings that have been called failed to address this central question.

For example, the handful of SYM and other comrades at the meeting of 11 December 2015, warned that the lack of a programme would create a situation where decisions will be made campus by campus. Campuses will begin and cease strikes at will based on the balance of forces on each campus. Even if they opted not to protest, this would be decided locally at each campus rather than in concert with the movement as a whole.

This approach is highly problematic. It defeats the purpose of posing a countrywide united front of students to create sufficient pressure to compel the government to concede to our demands for free education. The absence of a programme, the comrades warned, will create pockets of protests with either weak national solidarity, or none at all, from within and outside the student community which the government could easily crush. This perspective has already been confirmed by events this year beginning from January.

Whilst victories can be won with local campaigns and protests, you cannot fight structural problems in isolated pockets.

Some comrades felt that a programme would be seen as an imposition of ‘resolutions’ on different campus constituencies. Therefore they left the question to individual institutions to decide. This in reality meant we are premising the hopes and successes of the #FMF movement on spontaneous skirmishes on individual campuses rather

than a coordinated cross campus uprising based on a concrete coherent programme of action.

Everything that has happened since January has borne out our warnings. The movement has not been able to achieve the heights of mass involvement of especially October 2015. Instead it has fluctuated, with pockets of protest breaking out on different campuses in an uncoordinated manner. This is not to downplay the brave role comrades play in these protests. However, with the help of the PYA, media, the police, private securities and the higher education ministry, these struggles have been successfully disaggregated and suppressed. Without a programme adopted after democratic debate across all institutions, it was not possible to unite all campus constituencies around one common goal and line of march.

The lack of programme in reality leaves #FMF without a backbone. A programme by itself does not resolve anything; it requires the establishment of structures and leadership, that as its custodians, can be held accountable for its execution.

Leadership

From the failure to appreciate the central importance of a programme flowed the lack understanding of the importance of leadership. Revulsion against the popular concept of “leadership” characterised by the suppression of the voice of ordinary members, the sidelining of dissent, leaders answerable only to themselves and members obliged to blindly follow the line of march dictated by the leadership, is natural and correct.

To reject the concept of leadership in totality, however, is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It is not possible to implement a programme without structures in which individuals are allocated responsibility for its specific elements – that is a leadership.

Our leadership model must be based on the principle of elections subject to the right of recall. The resemblance between this and the traditional model would be only in form. It would differ entirely in its *modus operandi*. All decisions would be debated and adopted democratically by the membership collectively. The whole purpose behind the idea of leadership is to avoid a headless movement where accountability is non-existent.

Accountability ensures the execution of the programme, and, where necessary, the reworking of its tactics. Without leadership we remain uncoordinated nationally. It has meant that #FMF lacks the capacity to withstand government and management retaliation or even to

mobilize legal and financial resources efficiently.

The serious weakness the lack of leadership leads to was reflected in our failure to respond to accusations of FMF being a “third force” funded by the CIA. There was no response to these malicious allegations primarily because it was everybody’s responsibility to have done so if they wished.

This approach in reality translates into it not being anyone’s responsibility to respond. These allegations which will be used as justification to down on us heavily in future, needed a firm and clear response. We are not a conspiracy group that is planning a coup de’tat; we are concerned youth who want a better life and have a right to free education.

The implications of these weaknesses

History does not dance to our tune; instead it is us who are subject to its tune and must dance to its rhythm. Revolutionary science expressed in Shakespearean language demonstrates this clearly by saying; “There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to (great) fortune”.

In essence this emphasizes the importance of time and action. It is important to warn that demoralization is as much a feature in the historical period as confidence and optimism is. The discontent of the students which arises from their immediate material conditions of unaffordability and inaccessibility will not always be there. The pro-capitalist government and its neoliberal economic masters will step in to reduce the magnitude of the pressure of immediate material conditions. They have already done this in the reported increase in the NSFAS budget for the year 2016. This aspect played a crucial role in demobilizing students this January and thus weakening the potential of protest.

So if we do not prepare ourselves with a leadership and a concrete program we will surely be unable to harness the revolutionary tides that are looming ahead. There is an enormous potential for protests ahead of us which will be provoked by deregistration of students and general financial difficulties that students face as a result of no funding. We must be in a better position to harness this tide, because if we fail to we will be damaging our venture.

The tendency to avoid leadership and program seems to be tied to the idea of de-linking student struggles from the broader struggles facing other exploited and oppressed sections of society. We cannot be subject to academic liberals’ method of partitioning disciplines instead

of taking an integrated approach that looks at life in its totality. The bottom line is that we are fighting a highly organized system, imperialist capitalism. Free education is just but one battle front in this war. Calling for free education is to raise a structural question, and must therefore be tied as a transitional tactic of agitation to the entire struggle against imperial capitalism. Any attempt to untie the struggle for free education from the entire struggle of the toilers is a recipe for incorrect tactics and enormous weaknesses to be exploited by those who want to destabilize this movement.

It is this situation that encouraged the reactionary bigotry of the EFF/Pasma grouping to call a #FMF meeting and to build an apartheid wall to exclude LGBTQI activists. The fact that the #FMF has no official leadership in effect gives any grouping the right to call a meeting in its name.

The Socialist Youth Movement condemns in the strongest possible terms the exclusion and physical assault on LGBTQI activists. Reactionary bigotry of this nature has no place in our movement. But the most effective defence against this type of degeneracy is to place #FMF firmly on a democratic footing, organisational and strategic coherence by debating and adopting a programme of action, and the structures to implement it.

What then?

There is a need for reconstitution. The progressive groupings in the student community nationally have begun with talks to reconstitute what are the finest combative sections of the #FMF into a Free Education Movement (FEM) campaign with a clear ideological outlook, and programmatic and organisational coherence. The theoretical confusion and illusions that characterised the #FMF movement, and characterises what is left of it, need to be ironed out marching into the FEM.

The highly revolutionary task placed upon the shoulders of working class students at this current juncture is to establish a new broad radical organization of their own. This is because the #FMF has laid the basis for a founding of a new broader student movement. SYM will participate fully in the creation of a new broader progressive student movement, and invites other progressive forces to do the same. On the one hand we cannot let adventurists and populists to continue riding on the genuine course of our people for their end. On the other we have to present a progressive student alternative as opposed to PYA.