

The struggle for...

Free Education

The Fees Must Fall protests have resumed. Though they have not yet achieved the full height and unity of last year, they are clear on what they are fighting for – free education. They are taking place, however, in conditions where the government, after its humiliation in the local government elections, is determined to restore its significantly diminished political authority by a combination of tactics. In an attempt to break student unity, it is using the rotten carrot of subsidies to the poor and missing middle on the one hand, and wielding the stick of repression on the other – both calculated to divide and drain the protests of the public support that has remained with them despite serious concern about the violence.

Trevor Shaku *SYM national convenor*

It is becoming more and more evident that the arson on campus is being perpetrated not just by student hot heads who mistake this kind of action for revolutionary militancy, but by agent provocateurs organised by intelligence agencies to provide the state with a pretext to step up repression. We condemn state violence and the conversion of universities into militarized zones. Students have the right to defend themselves against this repression. We demand that all private security and police must keep out of campuses as university students demanded of the apartheid regime and for our right to protest peacefully to be upheld.

Students must actively oppose the burning of buildings and reject the patronising post modernist neo-liberal argument about the pain of financial exclusion argument justifying it. It is pointless, counter-productive, undermines public support and student unity and does not advance the struggle one inch.

Call for free quality education

The demands of this year's protest wave have centred on a clear call for free higher education for all, accompanied by the demands to drop any legal charges against students arising from previous Fees Must Fall and Outsourcing Must Fall protests.

The ANC government's proposal to exempt only the poor and missing middle from the 8% that individual universities may decide on was treated with contempt for the political ploy it is, aimed at three major things; dividing students, shifting blame from government to university management and quelling the wave of protest.

It has become clearer to many students that the problem of fee increments arises from government's education expenditure cuts. But far from protesting, university management has enthusiastically colluded in placing the burden of these cuts on the shoulders of working class students in particular, actively collaborating in the commodification of education, reducing it from a right to a privilege for the rich offered to the "deserving" poor as charity.

The government's opposition to free higher education comes from the ruling party's commitment to neoliberal capitalism. Therefore the demand for free quality education is a struggle against capitalism itself.



Even though the current wave of protest has not yet, and may not, reach the height of mass unity and struggle that was achieved last year, it has posed before the movement questions that emerged only in outline last year as the victory of a largely spontaneous movement obscured its importance. This year's protests have provided a gauge revealing the degree of discontent and outrage not just amongst students but in wider society. More importantly, from the point of view of the future of the movement, it has posed before it much more sharply the question of the subjective factor - a coherent national program and a national leadership to carry it through.

National Programme

The absence of a unified programme and leadership has resulted in the reproduction of last year's random protests without any campus-to-campus coordination. Furthermore, the protest activities directed at government offices or capitalist institutions have been organized not as part of a coordinated strategy but when certain activists deem it fit for their own campus.

This has meant that campuses strike against structural questions in a sub-structured and structurally-fragmented manner. However as contradictions sharpen and such weaknesses, which imperil the struggle, are exposed, the problem will have to be urgently addressed.

A further consequence of this weakness is that it has left the movement unprepared for the more sophisticated tactics used by the state and management to divide, derail and destabilise the movement using e.g. 'democratic processes' like the Wits University 'referendum'. The Wits students had some success in exposing management's duplicity through court action, showing management had no powers to call a referendum and that this was no more than a non-binding opinion poll.

In the absence of a national programme, campus activists are unable to provide leadership. Leaders must of course be held accountable and obtain their mandates through mass meetings at

all times. But without the clear directives that could flow from a programme agreed in advance, for the implementation of which a leadership should be held to account, the struggle is susceptible to ebbs and flows with the inevitable ups and downs in the mood of the mass of students without being able to measure progress on the basis of regular report backs.

Forces opposed to free education can lean on the understandable frustrations of many students to mobilise for mass meetings and push decisions through against continuing the struggle. The media focus on violence also influences the mood of students undermining the willingness to continue the struggle exposing activists to police brutality as it seeks to suppress the struggle.

Leadership

The lack of national leadership simultaneously feeds into and from the lack of program. The campus protests have emerged with their own local leaderships which have thus far laboured to sustain the protests with more or less success. Where protest has been sustained it is overwhelmingly due to the willingness of the student masses to fight.

In some areas this has opened up competition amongst the campus leadership for dominance or control of the protest by the adoption of extreme methods just to demonstrate to other leaders they are more radical than them. Meetings tend to degenerate into a competition in radical posturing producing empty shells instead of resolutions with a clear way forward.

The state has been able to take advantage through agent provocateurs and the ANC-aligned student formations. In what was clearly the result of a well-planned strategy, the government prepared its propaganda about its obligations to the poor and missing middle, lining up Sasco and Cosatu to immediately issue statements of support. At the same time, ANC-aligned individuals and structures, and black nationalists tapped into the anti-capitalist sentiments amongst students by calling for marches to capitalist institutions to provide the pro-capitalist ANC government with an alibi for its betrayals.

Build a unified free education movement

If the struggle towards free education is to be sustained and triumph, political and programmatic coherence needs to be achieved. Provincial meetings must be convened as a matter of urgency and followed by a national meeting, from which the institutional programs must be consolidated into one coherent national programme which will guide and coordinate the masses into national action. This will assist the movement to effectively transcend divisions incurred from lack of program and leadership.

Gauteng Free Education activists have already begun with this initiative, planning to bring labour and civic movements to act in concert. The Free State Free Education Movement is in the process of organising such a provincial gathering. We urge activists in all provinces to emulate these initiatives. Whatever the outcome of this year's protests on the specific question of a zero % increase across the board, and free education, it is clear that the government has raised the stakes in this conflict. Blade's statement that the protests are being instigated by Trotskyites whose ideas cannot be implemented is first of all an insult to students whom he accuses of lacking agency. It is no different from the 'reds under the bed' accusations of the apartheid regime who claimed that black people fighting apartheid were instigated by communists and could not possibly be anything other than happy with white minority rule.

More importantly, taken together with his other comments about the economy, his claims that free education is impossible, that the Freedom Charter is being misquoted and does not promise free higher education, nor has it even been government policy, exposes Blade, the secretary general of a party that calls itself communist, as a zealous ideological and political agent of the ANC government and its capitalist masters.

The SYM believes that a united countrywide Free Education Movement would be obliged to accept Blade's invitation to go beyond the question of free education, and to answer the question of capitalism's incapacity to meet our demands for free education, with a campaign for its overthrow and the socialist transformation of society. This would enable the student movement to link up with workers and communities to organize to educate and resist the neoliberal onslaught on education rights.

Them...



The estimated cost of free education for all 800,000 undergraduates is estimated to be around **R100 billion.**

The government already funds R25 billion.

How will we pay for free education?

R80 billion is lost every year through illegal financial outflows.

R700 billion lost to government corruption since 1994.

R725 billion sits unused in the bank accounts of big business.

R1.8 trillion worth of assets are under the management of the government controlled Public Investment Corporation.

...and Us

