

Struggle for free education must continue

Reject Heher's verdict: a lifetime 'debt sentence'

After mounting pressure, president Zuma has now released the long awaited Heher Commission report on the feasibility of free higher education. Located firmly within the framework of "free market", that is, neo-liberal capitalist economics, its conclusion that free education is unaffordable comes as no surprise. The #FeesMustFall campaign for free decolonised education must mobilise again until its demands are met.

Socialist Youth Movement

Whilst endorsing completely free higher education for TVET students, for university students, the commission recommends Income-Contingent Loans (ICL) from commercial banks. Students would take out a loan covering the full cost of study at the beginning of their studies, and only pay it back when (or if) their post-graduation income reaches a certain threshold.

The report aims simultaneously to reinforce the false narrative that free education is unaffordable whilst trying to undermine the unity of #FeesMustFall through the tactic of divide-and-rule. The concession of free education to TVET students, the "poorest of the poor", is an attempt to pit working class students against each other, reinforce the notion that university education is just for the select wealthy minority, whilst imposing, in the words of Tarryn Naude, a recent UCT Politics and Economic History graduate and queer student activist, a "debt sentence" on them.

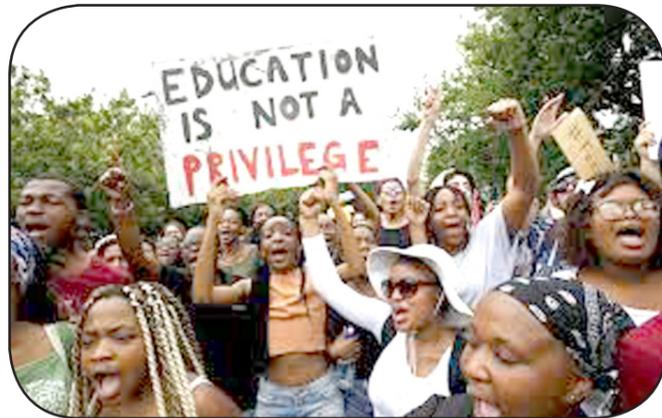
Aiming an ideological blow against the demand for free education for all, it "concludes that it is simply not accurate to suggest that higher education is purely a "public good", ...the primary benefit of higher education is to the individual graduate and their family: for the potential increase in personal or family advancement, status, income, future opportunity or, simply, self-gratification". (Daily Maverick, 14/11/17)

This conclusion confirms the continuity of class oppression between the post-apartheid and democratic era. As intended by Verwoerd, the architect of Bantu education, the aim of education policy is to exclude the working class whose only role in society remains now as then, that of "hewers of wood and drawers of water".

Free Education is affordable

Both the affordability argument and the attempt to divide the movement must be firmly rejected and resisted. There is a colossal plundering of the country's resources, both by big business and the Guptas – the Johnny-come-latelies to corruption. Free education is entirely affordable. A 2014 report by international monitoring organisation, Global Financial Integrity (GFI), covering the period 2003 to 2012, found that R147 billion in illegal capital outflows left the country every year.

"To put this figure in perspective, (former) Higher Education Minister, Blade Nzimande told parliament that R147-billion could accommodate all university students at all universities in the country." (Mail & Guardian, 16/12/14). It is estimated that R1.6



trillion is sitting in corporate bank accounts in what amounts to a strike of capital with big business claiming that they cannot find profitable areas for investment.

The Heher report, predictably, has been welcomed only by the DA and FF+. Beyond them it has attracted widespread rejection firstly by students in the #FeesMustFall movement. The ANC Women's League, Cosatu and the EFF have rejected it for various reasons. The Banking Association has expressed serious reservations about relying on government guarantees for student loans. Universities SA says the report's proposals are unclear. Even NSFAS has poured cold water on the viability of ICL as a substitute for its own role. In the end ICL merely reproduces the same burden on working class students as NSFAS does – a lifetime of debt that might never be paid given the dire economic crisis, shrinking jobs market and mass unemployment. All the institutions of the elite have come out unanimously against the demand for free education not only as a right but as a necessity.

Zuma – a free education messiah?

Given this situation it is not outside the realm of possibility that Zuma will exploit the divisions around the report to proceed with a populist announcement of his own. It is notable that whilst having released it under public pressure, the presidency has not endorsed the report. Instead it has announced that the ministerial committee is still "processing" it. It cannot be ruled out that Zuma may announce his own proposal for free education as a populist gesture either before the ANC's December elective conference or after in a desperate attempt to arrest the ANC's declining electoral support ahead of the 2019 general elections.

Against the background of the worst economic crisis since the ANC came to power, with economic growth revised downwards to 0.7% for 2017, a revenue shortfall of R50 billion and the Auditor General's findings of fruitless and wasteful expenditure amounting, so far, to R45 billion (that could climb to in excess of R60 billion) Zuma's approach to the question of free education is not driven by the interests of working class students. His priority is the interests of his faction in a life and death struggle to retain control of the ANC, by ensuring the succession of Nkosazana-Dlamini Zuma in order to keep him out of jail and to consolidate access to state resources for self-enrichment and corruption.

The R40 billion his advisor is rumoured to have calculated would be needed to fund their "free education" proposal, will not entail taking action against big business – to stop illicit financial flows or to increase corporate taxes which have been reduced to 28% today from 44% in 1994. It will in that sense be no different from the approach of the Heher Commission – to preserve the status quo of the class divisions in society and to bend the knee to the rating agencies – the financial global police. It will entail redirecting funding, for example, from the Unemployment Insurance Fund or cutting social welfare budgets to fund free education – robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Despite the phony class war against "white monopoly capital" Zuma is a representative of a faction of the post-apartheid black political elite that has overseen the re-ordering of class divisions resulting in inequalities within the black, coloured and Indian communities overtaking the inequalities between black and white inherited from apartheid. The highest level of inequality is now within the Black population with the top 10% owning 98% of the wealth.

Zuma's indifference towards the impact that a possible further rating agency downgrade could have on the working class, is shown in his willingness (together with his newly appointed Energy Minister Mahlobo) to publicly contradict Finance Minister Gigaba's statement that the proposed nuclear-build programme is unaffordable.

Zuma's "free education" will reinforce inequalities

Zuma's rumoured counter-proposal will leave the current inequalities across the entire education system intact – one that systematically culls the number who start primary school to the point where only 4 out of 100 blacks graduate from university.

As Neva Makgetla has pointed out:

"The quality of state schools mostly reflects their position in the apartheid system of 22 years ago. The top 15% of schools have been integrated, but they remain privileged. The rest – well, you're lucky to make it to matric, luckier to pass, and very unlikely to have a chance at further education.

In 2015, the wealthiest 15% of schools — virtually all of them historically non-African —



Unsurprisingly, retired judge Jonathan Heher says free education is "unaffordable"

accounted for 30% of university passes, while the poorest 25%, most of them in the former so-called "homeland" areas, got about half as many. The richest schools had a pass rate of more than 90%, with half getting university exemptions; in the poorest 25%, just 62% of pupils passed, and under a fifth qualified for university. (Business Day, 22/11/16).

Even worse, the effect of a downgrade would considerably worsen these inequalities as this neo-liberal government, unwilling to defy the ratings agencies and the interests of the imperialist powers they ultimately serve, will be compelled to step-up cuts to comply with their demands to maintain a cap on expenditure. Despite his appointment as Finance Minister, Gigaba, with much fanfare as an assault on "white monopoly capital", and the setting up of a parallel administration, his first order of business was to reassure rating agencies that he will continue the neo-liberal policies of his predecessor, Pravin Gordhan, to make the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism with savage cuts.

The overwhelming majority of students have rejected Heher's report. But the consensus that underpinned the unity of the #FeesMustFall Movement since 2015 has not been sustained. A number of factors have combined that has led to the break-down that secured the 0% fee increase in 2015. These include the active intervention by the state to subvert the movement. Zuma's advisor Masutha turns out to have been a spy for the State Security Agency during his time as a #FeesMustFall leader at Wits University. Equally important #FMF has lacked ideological, programmatic and ideological coherence leaving it vulnerable to being used to bolster the factional struggle within the ANC between forces that, despite the strident antagonism between them, represent the same anti-working class interests.

A national conference to unite #FMF

The routing of the ANC-aligned PYA in the SRC elections this year at Wits however, shows that the many students have seen through theirs and Black First Land First's radical posturing particularly during the second phase of the #FMF protests. Despite the BLF's craven collaboration with the corrupt Guptas, they will use Zuma's attempt to posture as the messiah of free education and present his proposal as a defiance of "white monopoly capital" to try and breathe new life into their campaign to legitimise corruption.

There is an urgent need to establish, ideological clarity, programmatic coherence and organisational unity to take the student movement forward once again. A campaign for free education must be linked to the struggle against capitalism and the socialist transformation of society. As the SYM has argued, the education crisis is rooted in the crisis of capitalism not only in SA but globally.

Student debt in the United States is the equivalent of all credit card debt. Students in Spain recently won a famous victory against the state's attempt to erect additional barriers to university education for working class students. Education cuts and opposition to free education is at the forefront of the agenda of capitalist governments across the world. The programme for free education must be linked to the struggle for the socialist transformation of society. This in turn requires uniting students in a mass socialist student movement, linking up with the organised working class, and working class communities under the umbrella of a mass workers party on a socialist programme – to place the commanding heights of the economy under the democratic control and management of the working class.

In preparation for this the SYM reiterates its call for a national #FMF conference to analyse the lessons of the struggle so far, thrash out a platform and programme of action, and to systematically link up with the working class communities in struggle and the organised working class. The SYM counter-poses to the craven cowardice of the capitalist elite, the unity of working class students in SA and worldwide in a common struggle for socialism.