

South African Students Take on Neoliberalism and the ANC

By [Asad Ismi](#)

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South African students shut down almost all of the country's universities this October during unprecedented nationwide protests against a planned 10% hike in tuition fees. Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets, and beat gathering students with truncheons, but were unable to suppress the movement. More than 10,000 people demonstrated in front of the nation's parliament in Pretoria on October 23, forcing the African National Congress (ANC) government to concede that there would be no tuition fee increase for 2016.

Emboldened by their victory, the students continued to press the government on related demands such as an end to contracting out of poorly paid janitorial, cafeteria and security work positions within the universities. From the beginning, student organizers insisted on linking their struggle to that of the working class. Universities have reopened, but the students remain committed to this and a third demand for free education and an end to tuition fees altogether.

"The demonstrations have grown to be a national movement of solidarity," says Katlego Disemelo, a PhD candidate at Johannesburg's University of Witwatersrand (Wits) where the protests began. "Far too long have we black and poor students languished under the yoke of perpetual struggle just to get an education. That is the chief impetus behind our struggle."

Disemelo, who continues to participate in the student actions, tells me the #FeesMustFall and #InsourceOurWorkers movements, "have shone light on the heinous blight of institutional racism and exploitation in South African higher education. Students and workers are the backbone of these neoliberal ivory towers."

At about 0.8% of GDP, the South African state spends much less on post-secondary education than the OECD average (about 1.6%) and less than it can probably afford. The proposed 10% increase in tuition fees would have transferred more of the cost of a university education onto students, bumping average fees to between \$3,000 and \$4,000 per year in a country where the median annual income is US\$2,300, 53% of the population lives in poverty, and 40% is unemployed. South Africa also suffers one of the highest rates of inequality in the world.

The ANC, which has ruled South African for 21 years since Apartheid (in coalition with the Communist Party), portrays itself as leftist and has the backing of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the country's largest labour federation. The liberation movement that thrust the ANC into power had high expectations of economic as well as political revolution, with hopes the nationalization of the country's exhaustive natural

resources would fuel social development.

This vision was swiftly exchanged in the early 1990s for IMF loans attached to neoliberal handcuffs on the new government. As a result, promises of free education and subsidized housing, medical care, electricity and water remain largely unfulfilled, compelling first workers and then students to strike against the state to demand economic rights.

The situation for the country's miners is especially bleak. In August 2012, police cordoned off, then fired on a group of striking workers from a platinum mine operated by the U.K.-based Lonmin in the northeastern town of Marikana. The event and its political consequences are captured in graphic detail in the 2015 documentary, *Miners Shot Down*, which is available for free viewing on YouTube.

With a death toll of 34, the Marikana massacre was the worst act of violence by South African security forces since 1960, when police killed more than 60 people in a crowd of several thousand protesting the segregationist pass laws. For many, it exposed the failure of corporate-led resource development and the corruption it is causing within the ANC and government institutions.

About a fifth of South African GDP is directly or indirectly generated from mining, most of it by foreign-owned companies, and it is to protect these private investors that the ANC has insisted on maintaining a neoliberal regime that prioritizes competitive (low) wages, while ignoring growing demands for nationalization. Though the government insists its Black Empowerment Programs, with their local content and employment quotas for major projects, help capture more of the benefits of mining, targets for black ownership of resource companies have been missed, and the industry continues to lobby against having to meet them.

When mineral prices were high (between 2002 and 2011) and the economy was expanding, the availability of cheap credit limited social protests. But with the collapse of raw material prices globally, starting in 2011, annual growth in South Africa fell to 1.5%, stimulating an explosion of protests all over the country as the country's leaders appeared to have no way of dealing with the severe economic crisis.

"The allegiance of the state's economic decision-makers to international and domestic finance and mining capital is obvious enough. Until the mining sector crash, corporate profits were amongst the highest in the world, and last year PricewaterhouseCoopers named our corporate elites the world's most corrupt," says Patrick Bond, a professor of political economy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban and author of the book *Looting Africa* (2006).

The Marikana Massacre was a consciousness-raiser, as are repeated threats by the credit rating agencies to downgrade South Africa to junk status unless fiscal discipline and monetarist ideology are tightened.

Bond tells me President Jacob Zuma and Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa ("the big business choice to be the next president") make up South Africa's "core neoliberal bloc." Both have been implicated in corruption scandals, with the latter chairing a large cellphone company responsible for "many financial misdeeds." Zuma is one of the 10 highest-paid national leaders in the world, yet he felt entitled to spend \$17 million in public funds on his

private house, supposedly for security improvements.

In one recent scandal—part of “a running joke,” according to Bond—the president tried to blame two army officers for a decision to allow the powerful Gupta family to land their private jet at an air force base so family members could attend a wedding. The Guptas own coal and uranium mines in South Africa, and are widely believed to hold too much influence over the appointment of government positions, including possibly that of Mosebenzi Zwane to mining minister in September.

For his part, Ramaphosa is worth an astounding \$450 million, which makes him the 42nd richest person in Africa in 2015, according to *Forbes Magazine*. He was chairman of Shanduka Group, an investment company that indirectly owned 9% of Lonmin’s shares at the time of the Marikana massacre. Though an independent commission of inquiry cleared Ramaphosa of wrongdoing in June 2015, he was promptly slapped with murder charges by the opposition Economic Freedom Fighters party (EFF) in July. In November, families of the murdered miners filed a \$95-million lawsuit against the man who could be South Africa’s next president.

Bond points out how the 2015 budget increases in government grants for the country’s poor do not keep up with inflation, resulting in an actual 3% drop in support. While much of the population has to deal with frequent blackouts, the government offers cheap power to the world’s biggest mining company, BHP Billiton. A prominent wealth manager declared the February budget was “a lovely budget for offshore investors,” with the country’s offshore allowance rising from 4 million rand (US\$282,500) to R10 million (US\$706,500). “The immigration allowance is now up to R20 million (US\$1,413,000) and corporates can take a billion (over US\$70 million) offshore,” said the Citadel director in February.

Disemelo is similarly outraged by the contrast between the ANC’s stated priorities and its obvious corruption, as well as the way it panders to the country’s industrial and financial elite. “There are countless scandals and exposés in the mainstream media every week about this or that cabinet minister misappropriating state funds or outright stealing from the government’s coffers,” he tells me.

But what is amazing is that most South Africans now know this and can see it with their own eyes. We are no longer willing to sit back and be exploited for the gain of only a few. We have been sold out by the ANC in exchange for their lavish houses, cars and clothing. Little do they realize that the global white imperialist capitalists who line their pockets, and whose financial interests they are so keen to protect, will give them nothing more than crumbs.

For Disemelo, the student movement is intimately connected to the broader social struggle for wealth redistribution and the reclamation of national resources from the clutches of a domestic and international elite.

“During decolonization, the first thing that people will demand is land. As such, we demand access to the land and its resources so that those who have been previously dispossessed can begin to reap the rewards and resources which come from that land, such that they can live decent human lives from and through it,” he says.

In this regard, I see no other way but to nationalize the mines of South Africa

so that its citizens can ultimately reap the benefits therefrom. As long as white global capital (and its cronies) still greedily hold on to the resources of this land, poverty, inequality and exploitation will continue to hold the majority of South Africans in neocolonial and economic slavery. And one of the instruments of such slavery is the outright denial of basic and free education for all South Africans.

Nationalization is also the platform of the EFF, a breakaway faction from the ANC that is challenging the party from the left. The EFF won 6% of the vote in the last election, giving it 24 seats in parliament. Notably, EFF leader Julius Malema was expelled from the ANC Youth League in 2012 for sowing divisions within the party related to resource nationalization. The internal committee that upheld the decision was chaired by Ramaphosa. Malema has loudly criticized both the white and black power structures in South Africa, and the EFF strongly supported the students.

“But most importantly,” says Bond,

“I’m increasingly impressed with the EFF’s ground troops, not just the two dozen parliamentarians. In November, the leaders brought out 50,000 red-shirted supporters to march more than 20 km from central Johannesburg targets like the South Africa Reserve Bank and Chamber of Mines all the way to the Sandton stock market. Their numbers and their demands for nationalization scared the heck out of the bourgeoisie.”

Also launching large-scale demonstrations in Johannesburg has been the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA). With 350,000 members, it is the largest union in the country. And like the EFF, NUMSA has taken a radical left position, calling for nationalization of large companies and the mines.

NUMSA left COSATU in 2014 and demanded Zuma’s resignation. Since then, the labour start-up has been exploring the possibility of founding a new socialist party to contest the ANC in elections. The union is currently focusing on creating a labour federation to rival COSATU. The students movement, the EFF and NUMSA signify a revitalized South African left that may soon pose a serious challenge to the ANC’s neoliberal hold on the country.

“The period ahead is at least going to offer the prospect of a working class steeped in left ideology deciding between institutions inside the ANC tradition versus those led by metalworkers and left social movements outside,” says Bond.

“This is very welcome, because the prestige of the ANC, plus the forcefulness of official Communist manoeuvres in the labour movement, have kept the bulk of the working class loyal to a liberation movement that long ago had ditched their interests.”

Asad Ismi is the CCPA Monitor’s international affairs correspondent. He is author of the radio documentary “The Ravaging of Africa” which Black Agenda Report called “ground-breaking”. The documentary is based on his award-winning article of the same title and has been aired on 28 radio stations in the U.S. and Canada reaching an audience of 30 million people. For his publications visit www.asadismi.ws.

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