

# South African Students Win Reforms, Build a Movement

November 10, 2015



In South Africa students have been protesting for the past couple of weeks. Their immediate concerns are the intended hike of tuition fees, on average about 10%. Starting from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, they have demonstrated against the planned hikes. Students have occupied buildings on their campuses, held mass meetings, moved around the campus grounds, forced senior university administrators and university councils into negotiations. Campuses across the country have been brought to a stand still; this has happened at a crucial time of the South African academic year, just before the end of the year exams are about to start.

Over the past few days the students also have moved out of university grounds and taken the protests into the cities. Most spectacularly, on Wednesday (Oct 21) hundreds of Cape Town-based students moved toward the precinct of the national parliament in downtown Cape Town. A number of them broke through the cordon of police - with their arms raised. The police responded with teargas and the shooting of stun grenades. Twenty-nine students were arrested, six within the parliament precinct and another 23 in the city's Central Business District. Those arrested inside the parliament grounds face charges of "trespassing" while all 29 have been charged with taking part in an "illegal gathering" and "public violence". Initially the "Bellville 6" (named after the suburban police station where they were held over night) had been threatened with the exceptionally serious charges of "high treason", which have since been dropped.

On Thursday (Oct 22) demonstrations continued throughout the country, in the major cities, but also in smaller towns and at campuses, which are located in rural areas and normally don't find much attention in the South African public debates. Thursday afternoon saw thousands descending upon the ANC headquarters in downtown Johannesburg. This morning, Friday, 23 October, thousands and thousands of students and their supporters are marching on the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the seat of government.

What is happening here? Why are these young people - dubbed the "born frees", raised and mostly born after the end of apartheid - taking on university administrations and the South African state? Why are they, who were supposed to be the post-apartheid dispensation's beneficiaries, exceedingly unhappy with the state of affairs? There can be no doubt that these protests are about much deeper problems than simply a raise of tuition fees, as much as such hikes will affect the poorest of the students. The current protests have brought young South Africans of different social backgrounds out to raise their voices on campus and in the streets. The protesters come from townships and rural

areas, but they also come from the comfortable middle-class areas, and some even from the leafy high-end suburbs. They are black (mostly) but also white (in quite substantial numbers). Among those arrested in the Cape Town parliament incident were several children of prominent families, including, as the social media picked up quickly, the son of the University of Cape Town's vice-chancellor. It is significant indeed that black and white students march together.

The students have been principled and courageous in their activism, mostly disciplined and despite the lack of formal leadership in many institutions where the official student representative councils have often been slow to react appear to be remarkably well-organised. At Wits University they organised alternative lectures before leaving for more activism and made sure they cleaned up the spaces they occupied because, as they say, they don't want to make the workers, "their mothers" have to clean up after them.

Academics from universities across the country have come out in solidarity with the student protests; professors, lecturers and researchers have marched with the students, some having donned their academic gowns, they have protected students against police brutality by forming human shields. A national declaration in support of student protests was released on Wednesday, signed initially by close to 250 academics; now this letter has gone global. The signatories affirm that they "stand with students in their fight for the democratisation of our universities." The incisive analysis of the letter of solidarity continues, "The current student protests that have erupted across the country are historic. They demonstrate a younger generation willing to take up the struggle against inequality, and to insist on the principle of education for all. Our students are leading the national debate on education, and we insist that they deserve our respect and attention."

The current student protests have not come about as rabble-rousing on a spur. Some have mused that the revolution is being tweeted; the movement however is far more than simply a hashtag. It may be better to say that what we see now is a catalyst of a politicisation that has spread-out on South African campuses over the past six months. In March this year, students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) began a vigorous campaign, "#RhodesMustFall" to have the statue of Cecil John Rhodes removed, which had been sitting on the university grounds in a prominent position for the past eighty years. They succeeded to find the university's support, a few weeks later the objectionable item was removed under the thunderous applause of hundreds who had gathered to watch this significant moment. From Rhodes Must Fall the movement grew to include other campuses, mostly those of the former white-liberal English campuses, such as Wits and the small university in the Eastern Cape, which bears the name of Rhodes, but also the Afrikaans, still very conservative and overwhelmingly white Stellenbosch University in the Western Cape.

The movement pursued the aim of "decolonizing the mind". Campaigns and discussions were started, at times aggressively, with the aim to change the academic environment, to establish new syllabuses to replace those that are perceived as Euro-centric, to change the institutional cultures of the universities, which were seen as still being untransformed and "too white" in style and substance, and, last but not least, to employ more black academics. This took occasionally ugly turns, the most painful of which perhaps occurred during a spell of overt anti-semitism in the wake of a social media declaration by Wits's former Student Representative Council President that he "loved Hitler."

Yet prevailing has been the hunger for new forms of knowledge. "One could also see it coming", writes Achille Mbembe, professor at Wits University who has accompanied the student movement class of 2015 with insightful analysis and relentless engagement, "in the extraordinary return to critical black intellectual traditions, to black feminism, queer theory, critical race studies, theories of intersectionality etc." Young students have rallied to read Steve Biko again and more intensely, Biko of course had always been part of alternative and in recent years also the official South African

canon. Significantly the new generation also rediscovered and revered and memorized the works of Frantz Fanon, read on his own or in conjuncture with Biko's. More recently some have found a new hero, an icon perhaps more than a thinker and strategist in Thomas Sankara, who had earlier remained virtually unknown in South Africa.

What has newly arisen over the past few weeks, couple of months, dating back to artistic activism to commemorate the third anniversary of the shooting of thirty-four striking miners during the 2012 Marikana massacre in August, is a new alliance of students and workers at universities. Both groups have been rendered precarious in the corporate university, which has fast been emerging with the neoliberal restructuring of the higher education sector in South Africa. "#FeesMustFall" and "#EndOutsourcing" campaigns have joined hands and these hashtags indeed have been painted together on banners carried by protesters this past week. This recent move from the sole focus on racism to pay more attention to issues of socioeconomic inequality has, in turn, inspired new intellectual desires. Mbembe again: "To these currents [of critical black studies] is now being added a renewed critique of political economy that aims at bringing together, dialectically, questions of race and property, of class and inequality, and of identity and what many call lived experience." Mbembe has variously spoken about the present time as South Africa's "Fanonian moment", a time when twenty years or so after the country's initial political "independence", an incomplete decolonisation, a new generation enters the social scene and asks new questions. The students who now rally and march and discuss and occupy ask such new questions; they also remind - quite consciously - South African society and politics of the challenges raised by earlier generations. "1976" has been written on placards held up by students at campuses this past week, recalling the revolt of the youth that eventually brought the apartheid regime to its knees. At this moment we don't know what will come of all this. We don't know how the state and the ruling ANC - neither being monolithic - will react. Institutional and political reactions these past few weeks, and indeed the past six months have been uneven and even ambiguous, ranging from police brutality to attempts of incorporation. We also can't foretell how the vibrant student movement will develop beyond the current moment. What we do know is that we witness an extraordinary moment - what a time to be alive! <http://rs21.org.uk/2015/10/23/south-african-students-win-on-fees-an-extr...>