

The Student Movement

Workers' Solidarity Federation

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Although we argue that only the working class, working peasants and the poor can make the revolution, we do support the struggle of the students to transform the institutions of higher learning (the universities and technikons) despite the fact that such institutions typically train people for middle class jobs. We do so because we believe that the student struggle is progressive, because we are anti-racist, because working class and poor students are the main victims of the problems that exist in higher education, because we stand for the principle of free, democratic and open education for all, and because we want to recruit student militants to Anarcho-Syndicalist politics.

Historically, the universities and technikons have been characterised by massive racist inequalities. First, in the form of open segregation up until 1991 between “historically white” and “historically black” institutions. Secondly, in the form of racial discrimination within specific institutions: a lack of funding for Black students which perpetuates the inequalities of the past by financially excluding needy students; racism by some staff; inadequate academic support programmes to attack the legacy of “Bantu Education”; predominantly White administrative councils inherited from the past; racist violence by reactionary White students etc. These inequalities are the direct result of Apartheid-capitalism.

But the ANC-led government has done little to challenge the legacy of the past. For example, it has refused to openly support the student struggles. Instead, it has condemned “student trouble-makers” and sent the police to attack protesters in a large number of cases. It has failed to make adequate bursaries and subsidies available to promote change, and is even planning to cut funds further! In fact, the South African is among five countries that spend the least on higher education in the whole world!

The effect of these practices is to reserve higher education for the rich. They must be challenged by the student movement.

Student-worker alliances

But the student movement cannot win on its own. Students come from a variety of backgrounds, and are only in the institutions of higher learning for a few years. This means that the student movement is unstable, because its membership is very varied, and because older activists are always leaving the movement. In addition, students are not involved in the production process, and therefore lack the structural power to launch a sustained attack on the systems of resource distribution (capitalism) and repression (the State) that perpetuate the problems Black students in general, and Black students from working class backgrounds in particular, face. The university is not an island, and isolated struggles cannot transform the system of higher education as a whole.

It is vital, then, that students build links with organised workers both on and off campus. Workers in the tertiary education sector, especially those in the lower grades, face similar problems to the students. Their jobs are badly paid and insecure, they face shopfloor racism, and they are being attacked through systems of “sub-contracting” and “flexible work” that undermine worker conditions and incomes. The tertiary education sector has very repressive labour relations. Workers and staff in higher grades, and even sections of the middle class itself (the academics) also face these issues.

There is thus a basis and a need for the building of a worker-student alliance. It is the workers who sustain the universities and technikons. It is the workers who have the power to defeat the bosses and rulers, both on and off campus.

But we insist that any student-worker alliance must serve the direct interests of workers. In the short-term, we oppose any “alliance” that manipulates the workers to win student demands, and then fails to come to the support of the workers. If students do not support the workers, the alliance must break. We should also try to bring staff associations and unions — such as those amongst academics — into the alliance. This will be facilitated by the fact that most staff are either directly working class (such as white collar workers) or from those parts of the middle-class whose conditions of work are the most similar to those of workers (teaching staff, technical specialists etc. work for wages, often do productive work, and typically lack overall control over the work process (as opposed to the small business capitalists and middle management who make up the rest of the middle class)).

Fight for a Workers’ University

In the long-term, we argue that the current nature of the higher education system, as it now exists, must be fundamentally transformed. At the moment, higher education often serves to train experts and managers who are hired by the bosses to help run capitalism by providing knowledge, skills and staff. Through the revolution, the institutions of higher learning must be transformed into Worker Universities: centres of learning and training that serve the needs of the workers and the poor, that help produce mass housing, not shopping malls, that train medical staff for popular health programmes, not private hospitals etc. Instead of universities and technikons being run from above by overpaid, bureaucratic elites, we call for genuine worker-student-staff over these institutions. The basis for this change will be worker, student and staff organisations taking control over the institutions and removing the ruling councils.

Mobilise now

In order to work towards these goals — a student-worker alliance and a Workers University — we raise the following issues. We are for student solidarity with workers struggles both on and off campus. We are opposed to any and all attacks on workers conditions in the tertiary sector.

We are for the breaking of alliances between student organisations and political parties in government such as the SASCO-ANC alliance because such alliances hamper the ability of the organised students to effectively fight for student demands. We are for the formation of broad “transformation fronts” of student organisations aligned to different political parties (SASCO, PASO, AZASCO etc.) as a transitional step towards the formation of a country-wide Black-centred Student Union independent of political parties. We are opposed all funding cuts, and argue instead for increased spending on all levels of education in order to remove the legacy of Apartheid. We call for an extension of academic support programmes. We raise the demand of free, democratic and equal education for all as a basic principle. We oppose all manifestations of racism, and defend affirmative action programmes.

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