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South Africa

# Interview with FeesMustFall activist, Palesa Mcophela

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**In October 2015 students across South Africa took action in the largest protests since the fall of apartheid, occupying their campuses and holding teach ins and demonstrations under the slogan FeesMustFall. After 10 days they forced the government to back down and declare that fees which they had intended to raise by 11% next year would remain frozen.**

**The South African magazine Amandla interviewed student activist Palesa Mcophela about the dynamic of the protests and the ideas behind them.**

**Amandla! (A!): How did the protest start at the University of the Western Cape (UWC?)**

Palesa Mcophela (PM): The protest was inspired by the national outcry over the fee increments that were happening in all the universities. At face value, the fees at the University of the Western Cape seem to be very low. However, for the students who attend the university they are very high and most of them cannot afford. The biggest problem that the students face is their debts.

Students are drowning in debt at UWC.

(A!): Very often we hear that students are apathetic and apolitical. How do you see student consciousness?

PM: The issue of the increment concerns everybody, even though politic shave taken a downturn as more students are not politically conscious. However since it was a national thing, our students knew about it. We struggle a lot with coloured students [1] who are not really active. However they are starting to catch on with us and realise that they need to join us in the struggle.

**(A!): So what were the main ways in which you organised and mobilised students?**

PM: We went from res to res, singing and mobilising students to come join us and fight with us. We came together from different organisations and we said that now, as FeesMustFall (FMF), we are just an organisation on our own. We are not politically aligned. If our different political organisations are against free education, it's either you leave FMF or you join us and be loyal to us.

**(A!): All the problems raised during this student uprising have existed for a long time. Why do you think the uprising occurred now?**

PM: Because financially our parents cannot cope. The situation of the students has deteriorated. Because management seems not to care. They turn a blind eye to the protest. Instead of addressing our problems, they criminalise them and call us hooligans.

And the students are actually coming with quite bright ideas. We are very much intellectuals and we have solutions to our problems, because we sat down and thought about it as a collective. It is not because we are bored or we have too much time on their hands.

But we want to be taken seriously, which is just something that the universities and the government are not doing: taking students seriously and actually listening to them and taking into account their solutions, which are quite

creative.

**(A!): Who have been the main forces behind FeesMustFall?**

PM: The main forces behind FeesMustFall are the students themselves. There is no other person other than the students. It is done by the students for the students. They are the ones who will be financially excluded. They are the ones who are stressed by SMSs and emails from student credit management. They are the ones who see their parents struggling to actually get funds to get them to university.

The students want education to be free, so that everybody can get education. Because we know that we are the lucky ones who are in university. There are a lot of people who are in the townships and these are our cousins our brothers, our nephews and our nieces who would still need education which is so expensive and people cannot afford it.

The only other people are the donors, who we do not know. We just tweet and ask for food. We just tweet and ask for water and support. That is the only thing.

**(A!): Who do you see as responsible for the students' problems?**

PM: Our biggest problem is the government and big business for actually making education into a commodity. Everything is commercialised. Besides the high fees you also get textbooks, you also get accommodation. There is also food and leisure, because we are young people.

We have a two-tier education system and the private institutions take most of the resources from the public institutions.

So yes, we need to stop commodifying education. And the government also needs to find other ways of us accessing education, and actually decolonising education.

**(A!): What do you see as the main achievements of the student mobilisation?**

PM: First of all it is unity. We came from different political parties, with different ideologies. However we were able to stand committed to one thing, despite our different ideologies. It is also showing a new, let me say like, it is a new revolution where people are able to come together for an idea, where people are not waiting for political parties to actually make a difference, they actually come together and make a difference. They are not waiting for their leaders. They become leaders themselves.

Yes, that is one of the biggest achievements. It is beautiful when people come together to actually work hard for something. Because we support one another, we are there for one another and now we know about each other.

Besides students having to unite, we also united with the workers. It is the most important thing. Because the workers, we see them every day and most students did not have a relationship with the workers until now. Yes, it is the unity.

**(A!): What demands still need to be achieved?**

PM: First of all outsourcing, and secondly the clearing of debt. Also, just to clarify, on all the other demands we still need a timeframe. When is it going to happen? How is it going to happen?

**(A!): Student demands often focus exclusively on student issues. But you have put very high on your agenda support for the outsourced workers on campus. Why?**

PM: Because the workers are also the parents who actually do not afford our education. They are our parents. We often stress them, you know: "Oh mommy we need registration money". And since they are not getting paid a lot of money they can't afford it. So these struggles are very linked to one another.

The workers are the ones who also contribute to the living conditions of the students. They clean our campuses. They are always there for us when we have problems.

**(A!): During FeesMustFall, student organisations have been very insistent on defending their autonomy and resisting intervention by political organisations. Why is that?**

PM: Because most political organisations, when they join our struggle, it will be for political points. Next year it is local elections. When they come they will actually even confuse problems. They will make it about themselves. But it is about the students.

And this also shows the students that they have power besides political power. They are able to fashion their own power and see how far they can go themselves.

Independence is very important, because we are going to be the future leaders. So we cannot be dependent on political parties who get things mixed up. We want the struggle to be very organic and not about any political party, but about the students.

And also we want fast results. With political parties there are always processes and procedures. Within political parties there is always politics. And, you know, politics messes up everything, it really messes up everything. And especially political leaders. When you politicise something it's not pure anymore, because there are so many other vested interests.

But now, since it is the students, they only have one interest - to get free education.

Together we have power. We have power as students. Before we did not know that. Before we did not know that we had power together. Now we have seen that we have power if we unite.

**(A!): What are the main ideological influences, if any, that have shaped the students' struggle over the last period?**

PM: I would say socialism, because with capitalism it is failing, especially here in South Africa. We have two economies, which are the rich, rich, rich and the very poor. As the students, we are very aware of this.

And then we see that capitalism is not working. The wealth is not trickling down very fast. It is actually taking its time. We want everything, everybody to share in the wealth. We even say we want a pure socialist education.

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So yes, the ideology we are moving to is socialism. The students want socialism.

The students want an African education. they want to decolonise.

Students want the land back. Because we see that our parents are suffering, suffering because we don't even own our land. So yes, socialism and getting our land back are at the top.

**A!: Lastly, Palesa, where do we go from here?**

PM: Where do we go from here? WE are taking back South Africa. Yes, we are taking out capitalism. We want socialism.

We want free education for everybody.

We want to develop South Africa and Africa. We want a United States of Africa.

Yes, we are trying to restore the African child and African society

[Amandla](#)

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[1] UWC is a majority black university - a former polytechnic in fact. In South Africa, the term coloured (or Cape coloured) is used to refer people of mixed racial origin, including those with South Asian backgrounds. This group is a minority population in South Africa as a whole but a majority in Cape Town