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South Africa

Soweto anniversary : is our 1976 moment still to come?

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In June 1976, exactly 40 years ago, thousands of high school students took to the streets. They were resisting the apartheid state's insistence that Afrikaans be a compulsory medium of instruction in schools along with English. In October 2015 thousands of university students across the country acted in unison against the annual fee increase. Some have argued that this was our "76 moment" in the new dispensation. I will suggest a different interpretation. I think that #FeesMustFall is more like the 1968/69 moment of university student resistance than the 1976 high school student uprising. The late 60s 1968/69 was a key moment in the world when students pushed the civil rights and anti-war politics of the time into a global movement of cultural resistance.

In South Africa, 1968/69 was the pivotal time where Steve Biko and other university students formed the South African Student Organisation (Saso), a radical black student organisation that developed the philosophy of Black Consciousness (BC). This BC philosophy and practice centered the black self through reflection and self-love. It insisted on connecting black struggles across communities and national borders with a Pan African outlook. Saso also critiqued the university system, whilst at the same time developing its own educational programmes.

There were leadership training programmes for university students and "formation schools" for high school students and community members. Saso significantly changed the thinking about education and society from 1968/69 onwards - they stopped fighting for education equal to white education, and started criticising white, privileged education as a domesticating or dominating one.

40 years later

The much publicized 2015/16 student resistance began at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015 when shit was thrown on the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. This was a protest against the continuation of institutionalised racism at UCT. This racism was symbolized by the central place which the statue continued to occupy, two decades after the fall of legal apartheid.

The protest started with a critique of signage and heritage at the university. It quickly began questioning the emptiness of transformation by insisting on a process and programme for decolonizing the university. The three-week occupation at UCT inspired similar black-led student movements across university campuses: the Black Student Movement at the University Currently Known as Rhodes, the Black Student Stokvel at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Open Stellenbosch at the University of Stellenbosch, October6 at Wits and the University of Johannesburg, Tuks UPrising at the University of Pretoria, and Reform Pukke at North West University.

For students, this meant a total change of the university as an institution. The starting point was understanding the devastating role and repercussions of colonialism and later apartheid, in order to figure out how to dismantle the institution of the university with its colonial roots. Students inside and outside of these student formations started to insist that language policy be relooked at, that the curriculum be reformed, that the faculty be more demographically representative, that institutional and interpersonal racism be eliminated, that the symbols and signage be changed, that the dehumanizing system of outsourcing on campuses be ended, and more.

Students started using creative and disruptive forms of protest to put pressure on university managements to

respond to their demands. These started out with calls for statues to fall and for changes to the names of buildings and to the artworks that hung on their walls. They were followed by exposing the actual racial and gender make-up of university staff. At Stellenbosch University a documentary film was made and distributed detailing the experiences of racism by black students on their campus.

Many people agreed with the sentiment of the students' demands. Fewer people agreed with the urgency and methods that students were using to insist that things change faster than before, that things change immediately, and more structurally. Everyone started talking about the merits of the student demands:

- Was it necessary to remove statues?
- Was that erasing history?
- Whose history and heritage was being protected and preserved at universities?
- Why are there still so few black professors and even fewer women?
- Were these students being racist by insisting that white people refrain from trying to insert themselves into protest spaces?
- Would it be opening a Pandora's box if university managements responded to the pressure and demands of students?
- How many texts by black authors would need to be added to curricula before students were happy, and how would these relate to the dominant Eurocentric curricula?
- How do we deal with rape culture and male students and professors who are known sex pests?
- Can we afford free quality higher education?

There were no easy answers, but the students succeeded in getting everyone talking about the unacceptable state of universities in 2015. Protests continued at individual campuses for reasons specific to those campuses until October 6, when a national day of protest took place.

Put the last first, and the first last

Students, academic staff and outsourced workers at the University of Johannesburg and Wits met collectively from July 2015, in order to respond to the questions raised by RMF a few months earlier. People sat together to think through what a critical relationship to the university could look like. There was a strong sentiment that universities had become talk shops and that little had actually changed since the first democratic elections. As a result, any collective engagement to change universities would need not only to think and talk about the problem but also to act to change it.

A framing question was suggested, debated and agreed upon: What is a decolonized public African university? On action, there was agreement to follow Frantz Fanon's suggestion: in the decolonisation process, "put the last first, and the first last". There was consensus that outsourced workers at universities were definitely "the last". Many had been working for the university for many years and were still receiving no benefits. They were treated like second-rate university community members, and paid slave wages of R1,800-2,000 per month.

The campaign for fees to fall resulted in university campuses being shut down by students across the country. Within ten days of the first shut down, President Zuma announced a 0% fee increase for 2016. We heard later that this commitment would be mostly paid for by the rerouting of unspent government funds from the Department of Basic Education budget, originally meant to upgrade school infrastructure. Surely this decision is one that will have repercussions and resistance from the high school students and schools where those funds were desperately needed?

The struggle in 2016

Student struggles are continuing. But the fledgling movement has stumbled. Flat, nonpartisan structures have been a very necessary experiment in more participatory forms of democracy. But how can they be made sustainable? University managements have placed the movement under severe pressure with tactics including:

- securitised campuses, with increased numbers of riot style private security on campus
- criminalisation of disruptive protest through court interdicts, which keep police on standby
- expensive legal teams
- prolonged internal disciplinary processes.

This has meant that the space to organise on campuses has been closed down and key student organizers have been excluded. In addition, different political formations have tried to capture control of the movement. And there have been serious divisions around questions of gender and sexuality. But even as these pressures have mounted, student organising and regrouping has continued in varying ways.

The battle to win a radical form of insourcing continues at universities, as management reneges on as much as it can, to make the process more affordable. Students and workers have continued to support each other's struggles under difficult conditions. Workers have also managed to self-organise outside of traditional union structures as they have recognised the inability of union structures at present.

From university students to school students and communities

There have been various attempts to connect university student struggles with community and high school ones. Like in the lead up to the 1976 uprising, the ideas of the new student movement have filtered into broader community discourse and struggles through the media. Some of the more radical student activists have been excluded, suspended or expelled from university campuses, as the Saso students were forty-odd years ago.

And like the Saso students, they have returned to their communities armed with critical questions of transformation and power, and more committed to spreading at least the BC and Pan African philosophies and practices. So last year looks more like a 1968/69 moment. Black students organised themselves to reflect, critique, imagine and action a different kind of university, education system and society. Now, we have entered a time when communities and schools are figuring out their own learning from the student movement questions and actions of the last year. The possibility exists that a "1976" high school student uprising is yet to come.