

A Commentary on Student Struggles, Violence and Organisational Weakness

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Introduction

This Comment is written in the wake of the strikes and nationwide protests by health workers in March 2023 led by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU). Our focus here, though, arises specifically from the wide coverage of the recent student protests about the intractable challenges of access to free quality education in South Africa. Even more recently there have been continuing protests led by student representative councils (SRCs) representing 14 institutions marching on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) offices (Hlati 2023).

We accept that some comparisons can be made between the students and people in the health sector, but there are significant differences between them, and that means that each should be analysed *sui generis*. For instance, (at least in regard to their public manifestations and proclaimed objectives) the EFF/SAFTU-led protests are presented as both *political* (intending to remove South African President Cyril Ramaphosa from office) and, given SAFTU's orientation, related to a wider remit of issues concerning the *political economy* and worsening conditions of working-class life as a result of the *neoliberal policies of the government*. In the case of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU)-led health workers' strike, this appeared to be directly about *working conditions and wages in the public health system* of the country.



Education as Change
<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>
Volume 27 | 2023 | #13712 | 10 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/13712>
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
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The student struggles were explicitly and predominantly about *access to higher education*, even though some elements of the wider issues in higher education were raised in the *course of the struggle*.

Without a doubt there are profound intersections between these struggles and the issues they raise because all of them concern the wider questions of public policy and especially the blight of fiscal austerity, political accountability and state failure, privatisation and the power of corporatisation, corruption and a host of other contemporary issues that speak to a rapidly developing national and global dystopia (Ngwane and Bond 2020). Each of these issues can be dealt with in detail but that is not our intention here. We repeat that each must be examined in their own right despite their causal and consequential similarities. Each has different purposes, forms of organisation and mobilisation, constituencies, and potential outcomes. In this commentary the focus is specifically on the student struggles. Two issues will be dealt with regarding such struggles. The first has to do with the way in which violence is viewed relative to student action, and the second concerns the weaknesses evinced in these struggles.

The Question of Violence

Coverage in the corporate and “public” media, discussions on radio and television and among friends and family have uncovered the extraordinary shallowness of conceptions about students’ struggles and their underlying causes.¹ This is the case even among those who are critical of the sensationalist, shallow and desultory outpourings of the media, which are quite rightly regarded as devoid of any real explanatory potential. This makes it necessary to think about these issues in more purposeful ways so that we are able to understand them better and shed some light on the shadowy gloom of the present.

To begin with, it is critically important to understand each situation *in situ*. This is to avoid the kind of vacuous generalisations we have seen in the press and elsewhere which are without reference to the actual situations and the context. We have to understand how and why these struggles have taken place, their mode of organisation and even their weaknesses and what has led to situations of conflict, threat and confrontation and the violence that *sometimes* followed.

As the statement drawn by academics at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town has shown (Wits Academics 2023), accounts of violence alleging that it was entirely due to the actions of students were both selective and misleading. These accounts simply show the orientations of some media to social and political struggles in which the occurrence of violence is invariably blamed on those who attempt to confront injustice while pursuing their legitimate rights. And this reportage almost always reproduces the historical mythology and the phobia about

¹ Space does not permit detailed study of the coverage we refer to.

violence derived from racism and its accompanying tropes, sometimes deliberately, and at other times unconsciously, imbibed by the media.

The selectiveness we refer to must be gauged against the reality that South Africa is regarded, in some quarters, as the “protest capital of the world”. Recent data suggests that there are more than 13,000 instances of protest per year for several years now. But more importantly, that the *vast majority of these are non-violent* (Duncan 2021; see also Rédaction Africanews 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

Ignoring the many instances of peaceful protest is selective and plays into the very mythology we refer to. These selective approaches also characterised written accounts of the events of 2015 and 2016, which similarly laid the blame for violence on students and those workers and academics who supported them (Habib 2019). Yet, if one were to ask the students and academics who were blamed for the violence about how *they* understood the events leading to violence, you would get a completely different account of it (Ally et al. 2019). Their account would show that some crucial facts leading to confrontations were deliberately omitted or mystified. For instance, you would hear that, contrary to the self-serving accounts that laid the blame for violence on the students and others, the reality was that students were engaged in a peaceful, even if demonstrative, protest—as all protests must be. These peaceful protests were confronted with threats and direct action intended to intimidate and to prevent their legitimate right to protest and engage in the actions that are an inseparable part of protest (such as calling on other students who are not involved to participate in the protests, engaging with them at the entrances, making banners, and singing songs of struggle). And also, that attempts to advise against the use of external “security” forces were ignored, resulting in exactly the consequences that followed—violent confrontation.

Furthermore, nowhere in the highly publicised (and partisan) accounts, especially in the corporate and “public” media, have we seen any attempt to provide evidence of the process of direct planning or organisation for the use of violence, even though it is entirely plausible, indeed sensible, and necessary, to have planned *against* the likelihood of the violence orchestrated by the militarisation of campuses (Reinders 2019). Such militarisation, moreover, is compounded when

[g]overnment ministries and corporate university administrations, faced with challenges to their authority, often use tactics of divide and rule and co-optation. But recent mobilisations in South Africa illustrate some possibilities for student/worker alliances and solidarities despite the use of private security and revelations that the state employed a network of informers within FeesMustFall. (Choudry and Vally 2020, 13–14; see also Gichanga 2019)

We argue that even if a small group of students was driven to planning for violence either *as agent provocateurs* or as politically driven *nihilists*, this is not unusual in historical contexts such as these. But such an orientation could hardly be ascribed to the vast body of students who entered the protests as peaceful participants opposed to any

suggestion that they willingly orchestrated violence. Indeed, the likelihood is that many would not have participated if they perceived the possibility of such violence. More importantly, as journalists, “political commentators” and analysts of such social phenomena (and compellingly as intellectuals and academics) ought to know, from a reading of the history and contextual origins of nihilistic ideas, they arise in every case as a consequence of the cynicism, state orchestrated and structural violence, both passive and overt, which are the foundations of the nihilism and its associated forms of violent resistance (Diken 2008). It is the underlying causal factors and the agenda of political and other forms of exploitative and oppressive relations (Ngcobo 1999) that together produce the fecund ground for nihilism.

Nihilism is a symptomatic expression of the deeper pre-existing dystopia in such societies, and in this “age of anger”, it is no less a response to a situation of utter desperation, hopelessness, and the inability to contemplate or visualise any possible alternative in the prevailing conditions affecting their daily lives. And it is very important to understand that nihilism and its associated forms of militant action are not the same as the wide variety of anarcho-syndicalist, socialist and other left-oriented political philosophies and strategies (Wetzel n.d.). Only uninformed and ignorant commentators regard these as similar. For these philosophies, nihilist ideas are in reality counterproductive and destructive for political and social mobilisation and in some respects have the same effects as that of *agent provocateurs*, as we know from our own history.

What is also missing from the accounts of student protest and action are the factors that cause divisions (either deliberate or consequential) among students and academics. So, for instance, there are likely to be different orientations to the struggles for universal free education between those students who are the recipients of National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) support and those who are not.

Often the attitude of some administrations is that protesting students have no right to infringe the right of those students who are not implicated in the NSFAS and funding issues, and that protests and other actions violate the rights and freedoms of those not so implicated. The argument about the protection of “equal rights for all” deliberately misconstrues the meaning of such rights and its proper interpretation. In countries such as ours (are there exceptions?), such a right is meaningless where power divisions between rich and poor and other forms of social fragmentations make it impossible to argue for “equal rights” out of context. Social and other rights are only as good as they can be exercised equally and any other interpretation of that is mystification. Given the social structure of our society and the historical legacy of class, gendered and racialised divisions, the complaint that everybody has an equal right is a patently divisive strategy.

Moreover, the question of free education implicates all students—indeed all society, as we have argued previously (Motala, Vally, and Maharajh 2018).

This divisiveness is exacerbated by the insistence that lectures should continue “as normal” for those staff and students who want the “freedom” to continue with classes, thus driving a further wedge not only among students but also between them and their lecturers who are coerced to follow instructions. What is more is that in the case of those teaching staff who have felt the need to act in solidarity with students, their right to do so is impeded by the instruction that they must be at work even if classes are suspended. This is a threat that increases the precarity in their conditions of employment even further than is the case at present.

All these factors require us to be circumspect and read critically the tendentious reportage about student struggles.

Weaknesses of Student Mobilisation and Organisation

Beyond the issue of violence, any discussion of the present struggles around the right to education must also deal with the related issues that arise perennially in respect of student struggles, that is, the weaknesses in the very forms of mobilisation and organisation among students and their contributory factors. These weaknesses exist despite the instances where, as we note above, SRCs have come together to march on NSFAS offices. What is required is self-critical reflection and discussion among students and those associated with their struggles. We deal with some of these issues briefly in the hope that this will stimulate honest, frank, and reflective debate by all those engaged in student struggles.

First, there is the question of the complicity of those students and their parents who appear blissfully (or conveniently) unaware of the importance of these struggles, even while they are direct beneficiaries of them. Especially those parents who can—since there are many who cannot for reasons which should be obvious—have reneged on their obligation and the urgency of acting in solidarity with those students who are required, literally, to put their bodies on the line. It could be argued that they are afraid of the real or perceived consequences of participating in public action, given especially the ever-present potential for a coercive response from those in power. But do they not have the responsibility, anyway, to engage with other parents and their communities about these issues openly and directly, or even, as parents, to engage in an organised and concerted way with those in power about it? Such engagement is not only important from a moral (and financial) point of view, but is critical for its potential to develop wider, inclusive, co-operative, and democratic processes in the student movement itself *and in the societies in which they live as citizens*. What compelling reason can there be for parents and their communities to fail in this regard? For how long must it be taken for granted that it is okay to rely on others to make all the running, to take the risks and to fight the fight for all?

Second, while we do not wish to minimise the many difficulties that prevent wider participation in social action, for as long as students themselves are unable to find a way out of this conundrum, the impact of their struggles and those of their society will always

be limited. Until now students (and the academics who support them) have not found a way to engage the wider public to support their struggles. For as long as the organisation and reach of the student movement depend on the hard work of a small and vocal group of active students, who rely on mass-based participation, its endurance will be limited and wither with every episode of the succeeding struggles. Worse still is the fact that the extraordinary dependence on a small number of committed “leaders” has consequences for that very leadership and its potential influence, its legitimacy, the forms and distribution of power, democratic decision-making and accountability, consciousness, and action. Ironically, the very fact of strong commitment by a few leads to the increasing dependence on them by their peers and minimises the potential for wider participation. Is it not time to think of alternative or at least complementary strategies?

Third, and here we wish to draw on our direct experience in the course of the events of 2015/16 where, for instance, neither the organisation formed by academics in support of students, nor the student groups with which we worked closely have survived, not even as pale images of their momentous past. Even if there is some historical memory of these past struggles, organisation has to commence *de novo*—since not even the rudiments of the old remain available. Past struggles, it seems, have not been able to sustain themselves into succeeding generations of students because of the inability to engender wider support from within the student body—a situation prevalent also in the election of student representative councils—such as they are. More enduring, accountable, and democratic structures must be built together with the educational and consciousness raising objectives that such associations must promote.

Fourth, the ephemeral nature of past struggles not based on the development of support, not only from the communities from which students come but also that of social movements, progressive trade unions and other student bodies, leads to the very situation which now prevails and the need to “re-invent” the struggle at each juncture. It is especially important that such wider forms of mobilisation, organisation and education about the substantive issues that give rise to student struggles be taken forward in the communities and social movements from which they come and more widely. This is entirely possible given that exactly the same causal factors that affect student access prevail in their communities relative to fundamental social rights. As we now see daily, these issues are the basis of wide-scale mobilisation and action across many fronts—as many as the crises from which they arise. It is the self-same austerity, political opportunism, corporatisation of the public good (Roseman 2010), bureaucratic inefficiency and managerialist approaches, corruption, and the war against communities of the poor that are the objective basis for the plight of students.

Fifth, and perhaps most disconcerting, is the weakness of student struggles resulting from party political and other forms of sectarianism—that is, the limitations imposed on student participation by those formations/associations that cannot pursue a principled and agreed strategy on account of specific allegiances to party political, religio-cultural,

linguistic, or other sectarian interests. Party political sectarianism in particular is often compounded by a specific (yet undeclared) orientation to the state and the political economy based on such allegiances, which limit the unity of students and those supporting them. This limitation also applies to sectarian orientations to issues of gender and sexuality, racism, and sectional interest. Furthermore, as in the case of SRC elections, party political allegiances drive away the possibility of wider student participation because many students want little to do with party politics. Sectarianism of any kind imposes limits on the possibility of forming principled forms of organisation. Unless these issues are confronted openly, it will always limit the possibilities for enduring organisation based on principled and inclusive organisation.

And yet there are many common and shared standpoints around which they can be organised. To take one example, the case of those academics and students who have mobilised around LGBTI+ issues giving rise to strategies and *unity in action*. Similarly, students have many other shared interests (including in their respective faculty-related societies) around which they can be organised—housing, food, access to facilities, transport to and from campus and a wide range of academic issues based on their experiences of teaching and learning, the curriculum and supervision. Strategies can also be devised based on where students are housed since they are already in such places collectively. These and other strategies need to be discussed and debated frankly. We know that there are no easy answers and that is why oppressive systems endure for as long as they do despite the deepening contradictions they spawn. But by working collectively and respectfully, broader forms of democratic and inclusive organisation can be developed, especially if these weaknesses are acknowledged by all of us.

Sixth, a critical factor is the indifference of the vast majority of academics, and their single-minded pursuit of individualist goals also driven by the corporatised regimes of knowledge production. They remain unconcerned about the very effects of their narrow pursuit and its diminution of their *collective and individual* rights. At this very time there is a wide range of issues that must be of great concern to academics—which it is not. This includes the extraordinary levels of outsourcing of academic roles, precarious part-time sub-employment, performance and management criteria that have little relation to the critically important knowledge, teaching and socially useful roles that must be at the heart of academic life. There is a need to resist the unprepossessing pursuit of ranking and rating, the lure of executive mobility in place of serious social scholarship and a host of other troubling characteristics, which are becoming more and more pervasive in academia. Academia now increasingly mirrors the power of corporatisation, ecocide, and the manufacture of war in the production of knowledge.

Unless students together with academics consciously and deliberately support actions aimed at promoting the wider, humane, and liberating role of education and the production of socially useful knowledge, the hopelessness that leads to desperation, and violence should not surprise us at all. Unless there is an effective response to the production of egregious inequality and the power of corporatised state-driven regimes,

the present situation, which the majority is forced to endure, will persist. This reality requires all conscious beings—students, academics, and socially responsible citizens to support in every possible way the many forms of democratic and public mobilisation for the common good. This also means confronting the power of those who persist in the production of desultory and damaging explanations about some of the most important issues of our times. It means too that we must demonstrate the relationship between the policies of austerity and corporatisation in education and those that affect all public services and democratic accountability. It is every conscious person's responsibility to show that much deeper, systematic, and enduring analysis is possible and must be demanded to counteract the power of the dominant explanations of social reality. It is more than ever essential and urgent to support those processes, forms of democratic social organisation, consciousness and social actions that already exist in our societies and which are our only hope for the development of a just and humane world.

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