

Two student protesters killed by police in Durban, South Africa

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Last Tuesday, May 16, two students were killed at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), when police opened fire on a group of protesting students at the campus. Michael Makhabane, a 23-year-old student from Ficksburg in the Free State, died after being hit in the chest by a blast of pellets. Another student, Lala Ngoxolo, was also killed. A third student is said to be fighting for his life in hospital. Police have admitted that five students were injured.

The students were demonstrating against the de-registration of 517 of their colleagues who were unable to pay their school fees. Witnesses said members of the Public Order Policing Unit attacked the group of 50 students. Initial reports spoke of police firing rubber bullets at the crowd, but a second post-mortem by independent pathologists revealed that Makhabane was not killed by a rubber bullet.

Sticks Madlala, spokesman for the Independent Complaints Directorate (ICD), said pellets were removed from Makhabane's body but he could not confirm if the pellets were fired from a shotgun. He said that the ICD were now treating the shooting as a murder. "Independent pathologists found that live ammunition had been used on the deceased. Pellets found in the wound, which was on the left side of the chest, caused his death.

The university had been closed the day of the protest. It followed a class boycott the previous week opposing the university's decision to de-register 517 students for non-payment of the 1,500 rand (\$213) registration fee, which some poorer students could not afford.

A report sent to the *World Socialist Web Site* quoted a UDW professor who commented: "Of course we don't expect much from the Durban police. After all it's no secret that the police control the drug trade in this city and it was just a couple of weeks ago that a young girl

accused of shoplifting was brutally gang raped at the Phoenix police station.... Nevertheless we still don't expect the police to murder our young people like this."

Regarding events at the university, he continued, "the police officer on last night's news lied when he said that the police acted to prevent a hijacking. [This was in answer to the media reports like that of the South African Press Agency, SAPA, which accused students of trying to 'hijack a vehicle on campus' prior to the shooting.] I've been told that a small group of about 50 students was attacked as they fled from the police. I've also been told that the first student to die was just passing by ... when he was shot, at point blank range, in the chest."

The professor explained that the police violence against unarmed students shocked onlookers. "After all the strike against the exclusion of students who can't pay their fees is an annual event. The worst case scenario is that a couple of students spend a night in prison. This year the boycott did include a number of other issues like the retrenchment of 33 members of staff; the closure of five 'unprofitable' departments (including Music and Fine Art); the failure of the University to provide lecturers for the (fully paid up) dentistry students and the University's apartheid-style restriction of basic civil rights—like the right to hold a meeting.... But despite all this it didn't occur to anyone that our students were about to be murdered."

After the police violence, University council vice-chairman Krish Govender announced that a meeting of management, student representatives and the Education Ministry had agreed to reopen the university this week. Govender said that the university council would request an independent investigation into the last week's events on campus but pledged that this would not interfere with the state investigation. At the same time,

professors were banned, under the threat of dismissal from contacting the media.

In the email sent to the WSWs, the UDW professor continued, “The Soweto uprising did not happen for this, people did not stare down their torturers for this, people did not go to prison and die for this.

“I remember the outrage when students were injured, just injured, by the Boer and their birdshot at UND in 1989. There was a huge protest at UNP the following day and over 400 students were arrested.... If we are going to retain any humanity we have to be a lot more angry, and yes, unforgiving, this time. A life is still a life and a system is still a system and a killer is still a killer.

“We can't be complacent when 1 in 4 pregnant women has AIDS; jobs are lost every day and the police murder our young people for asking an awkward question like: ‘Why must I be denied education just because my parents are poor?’”

The murder of the two students took place as President Thabo Mbeki's ANC government has stepped up its repression against popular opposition to its pro-big business policies. Less than a week before nearly half the country's workforce went on strike and more than 100,000 workers marched nationally against growing unemployment. In Durban police fired tear gas at a crowd of protesting workers and students.



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