

Students occupy University of Cape Town building in anti-Cecil Rhodes campaign

Thabo Seseane Jr.

27 March 2015

Protesting South African students escalated their “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign last Friday, when they settled in for the night after storming and occupying the main administration building at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

The university is erected on land donated by the imperialist mining financier, Cecil John Rhodes.

The occupation followed an incident in which students defied UCT Vice-Chancellor Max Price. They cut short a speech in which he had meant to address student grievances and took over the Bremner Building where staff have their offices.

Student leaders gave notice that their fight against racism in higher learning would be extended to encompass the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, as well as Stellenbosch University, previously an unreconstituted bastion of Afrikaner privilege.

Students have called for nearly three weeks for the removal from the campus of a statue of Rhodes. They said the statue of Rhodes reminded them of colonisation and institutional racism at the university.

Rhodes was a white supremacist and warmonger. He took a leading role in the bloody dispossession of indigenous southern African peoples as far north as present-day Zambia, while he rose to become prime minister of the Cape Colony after it was first settled by the English in the 1820s. Through the proletarianisation of Africans, he was able to guarantee himself a cheap supply of labour for his diamond mines in the northern Cape, and then on the Witwatersrand, following the discovery of gold.

The controversy over the statue has exposed various levels of philistinism about South Africa’s historical figures.

“Embrace Rhodes’s statue, it’s a reminder of the past and of hope,” Kameel Premhid writes in a *Mail & Guardian* opinion piece, “[T]he legacies of some of the

senior Rhodes scholars, such as Bill Clinton, Kumi Naidoo, Edwin Cameron, Ngaire Woods, Amia Srinivasan and many more, should make us all realise that a dubious legacy does not shackle hope for the future.”

To speak of “hope” in the same sentence as Clinton, another imperialist warmonger, and Naidoo (who as leader of Greenpeace is the exemplar of upper-middle class activism) deserves no further comment. Then again, Premhid himself is a Rhodes scholar.

“If the Rhodes statue were to be taken down, who would replace him?” Rebecca Davis asks in the *Daily Maverick*. “Mandela? Biko? Tambo? If the status quo is anything to go by, it would be another statue of a man.”

Davis continues, “[I]t is rare to find a representational (non-abstract) statue of an individual female figure from post-colonial South African history in the way that one would of, say, Mandela or Biko.”

Elsewhere she complains, “Albertina Sisulu is now immortalised in bronze outside Parliament—but holding hands with her husband Walter.”

Davis and her ilk like to masquerade as liberals and even “leftists,” but in reality they are shot through with conservatism.

Davis effectively equates colonialism with the progressive South African working class struggle for democracy, by reducing both to the question of how many female statues have been erected in commemoration of either period. Since the heroic struggles of South African workers have resulted in not very many statues of women, the anti-apartheid movement, in Davis’s insinuation, was no great improvement on the colonial and post-colonial horrors that went before.

The reason for a lack of female statues is not mere misogyny, but the systemic continuity between government by the African National Congress (ANC) and government by the white supremacists of old.

Certainly juridical apartheid is no more and some strides

have been made towards integration. But the fact remains that, despite universal suffrage, inequality is worse now than at any time during apartheid.

The reasons have to do with many objective international factors, including the globalisation of the chain of production and the rise of China on the basis of the country's reinvention by its capitalist rulers as the sweatshop of the world. The result in the "new" South Africa from 1994 onwards has been the redoubled exploitation of workers. This was necessary not only to compete against China, but also to finance the elevation of the local political elite into the ranks of the bourgeoisie through the compradorist policy of Black Economic Empowerment.

However, these facts in turn point to the most fundamental issue that is concealed behind the Rhodes controversy: The abortion of the revolutionary struggle against apartheid and the preservation and continuation of capitalism and imperialist exploitation.

By confining the perspective of workers to fighting only racial discrimination, the pseudo-leftist trade unions and the United Democratic Front left untouched capitalist exploitation.

The bourgeois nationalist ANC won power due to its promotion to workers by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and, above all, by the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP), which insisted that social revolution was not possible until some unspecified time after genuine bourgeois democracy was established in South Africa.

Even after the fall of apartheid, there could be no serious challenge mounted to social divisions that were rooted in the capitalist exploitation of the black working class by the local bourgeoisie and the imperialist corporations and banks, whose rule continued without challenge. It is why the end of apartheid brought no improvement in the lot of the majority of workers, whatever their defined ethnicity, and inequality remains entrenched.

A telling sign of the ANC's prostration at the feet of imperialism was the merger of the Rhodes and Mandela foundations. Of course Shaun Johnson, CEO of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation since 2002, is a Rhodes scholar.

In hacks like Davis and Premhid, Rhodes has well-placed defenders of his legacy. People in this layer use identity politics as a means of advancing with the present capitalist elite, their own upper-middle class agenda. They achieve this by justifying the present system, always

opposing any thought of overthrowing it. They suggest that it can be improved, for example, by the addition of several more statues of women!

The constant resort to identity politics and the fiction that capitalism can be made more democratic for women and minorities is meant to keep the majority of the people, poorer workers and the unemployed masses, from staging any bid for power independently of the organisations of the bourgeoisie that exist within the proletariat. In South Africa, these include the ruling ANC and its tripartite alliance partners, the SACP and COSATU.

However, bourgeois instruments also encompass all opposition parties in parliament, such as the reactionary Democratic Alliance as well as the Economic Freedom Fighters. Outside parliament, the National Union of Metalworkers' new United Front and the Workers and Socialist Party are being developed against the day that workers launch a general uprising against the status quo.

These pseudo-leftist organisations are a preferred means of blocking the independent struggles of workers against their oppressors. They deny the Marxist precept that class is the fundamental division in capitalist society. The wealthy upper-middle-class union bureaucrats and intellectuals also rely on race, gender, religion and sexual orientation as means of dividing the working class whose potential they fear and despise.

South Africa remains an unequal, divided society not only because of the persistence of racism, but primarily because capitalism survives intact under the ANC.

In the ongoing radicalisation of society, progressive students must connect the struggles of the working class against a system that dehumanises all. They must turn decisively away from petty bourgeois influences and build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International to expropriate private property and reorganise industry and society under the democratic control of workers in South Africa and internationally. Only on this basis can the racist, exploitative legacy of Rhodes finally be transcended.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact