South Africa: University students storm parliamentary precincts

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South African riot police fired stun grenades to disperse protesting students who forced their way into the parliamentary precincts on October 21.

Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene was delivering his medium-term budget speech. According to the IOL news site, "At least one policeman was seen tasering students as they were being pushed back to the gates."

The students, from the University of Cape Town (UCT), Stellenbosch University and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, were part of a nationwide movement to shut down institutions of higher learning in protest against mooted fee increases. Earlier the same day, police fired teargas and rubber bullets at peacefully protesting students from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, injuring at least three.

Speaking on *MetroFM* the following morning, national police spokesman Vish Naidoo said 30 students were arrested outside parliament.

He denied reports that some of them were facing charges of treason. However, Bruce Hendricks, a lawyer for six of the students, told broadcaster eNCA that the treason charges had only been deferred while investigations continued.

The protests began the previous week at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in reaction to a proposed 10.5 percent fee increase. Nene's Budget speech contained no increased allocations for higher education.

Inside the house, right-wing opposition Democratic Alliance leader Mmusi Maimane took the opportunity to criticise Nene, President Jacob Zuma and Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande. "We urge President Zuma to address the nation as a matter of urgency in order to restore calm," he said.

Leaving through a side door as advised by acting Speaker of Parliament Thoko Didiza, Zuma was whisked off the premises in a cavalcade whose blue lights were switched off so as not to draw attention. Nene, Nzimande and other ministers, surrounded by bodyguards, then tried to address the students from behind a railing, but were booed and drowned out by chants of "Blade must fall!" Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Bheki Cele, a former police commissioner, was also booed.

A day before the events at parliament, Nzimande announced that fee increases would be capped at 6 percent for 2016, following meetings with university managers. Wits Vice Chancellor Adam Habib said, "This is simply creating an enabling environment for 26 or 27 institutional negotiations to go forward."

Student leaders at the meeting pointed out that they had not agreed to the 6 percent cap, but still had to consult those who delegated them. Protesting students responded with a demand for zero percent fee increases, vowing to shut down universities until they were heard. "I think we're very, very disappointed and disgusted about the lack of seriousness around this issue," said Wits Student Representative Council President Shaeera Kalla.

The Department of Higher Education and Training provides Wits with subsidies of roughly R1.4 billion (US$100 million), while university expenses total some R5.1 billion. The upfront registration fee for those accepted to study at Wits is R9,900. Even more expensive than Wits are UCT (with a registration fee of R24,000), Rhodes University (R19,200) and the University of the Free State (R13,000).

According to *StatisticsSA*, gross monthly wages in South Africa averaged R11,287.12 from 2004 until 2015. The unemployment rate is officially 25 percent, while the expanded definition of unemployment,

including those who have given up searching for work, is estimated at 40 percent.

Nzimande set up a committee to review university funding several years ago. In its report, released in October 2013, the committee found that "the amount of government funding is not sufficient to meet the needs of the public university system… Government should increase the funding for higher education, to be more in line with international levels of expenditure.

"South Africa's budget for universities as a percentage of GDP, the committee reported, was just 0.75 percent. That's lower than the Africa-wide proportion of 0.78 percent and the global proportion of 0.84 percent."

These figures are cited by Wits professor of political economy, Patrick Bond. He published an article, "Only pressure on SA's elites can ease university fee stress" in the *Mail & Guardian* in which he claims government debt is too low and should be raised to fund higher education while interest rates are lowered to help heavily indebted students. Bond understands that given the role of the South African bourgeoisie as junior partners of imperialist finance, such measures would lead to debilitating capital flight. "The solution," he writes, "lies in reimposing exchange controls."

Bond is part of a pseudo-leftist collective which, as social resistance hardens against African National Congress government policies, is enjoying new currency among the mouthpieces of the bourgeoisie. These wealthy upper middle class intellectuals, privileged union bureaucrats and gender and climate activists are among the last lines of defence between popular revolt and the oligarchy whose system they claim can be reformed.

In spite of all their progressive rhetoric, they can offer only nationalistic solutions. This includes the throwback of imposing exchange controls in an age when international finance capital is more fluid and powerful, far more than when the National Party government of the Apartheid era relied on such restrictions to keep the country afloat while South African goods were subject to sanctions.

Poor university students have begun to understand that their plight is no different from that of the exploited workers who service their campuses. This is why the mandarins of higher learning reacted with such alarm when workers and students went on protest together, with Wits's Habib cutting short his attendance at the Higher Education Summit in Durban to listen to student demands.

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