

The origins of the Oxford University “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign

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Oxford University’s Oriel College has decided against the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes from its grounds. A plaque dedicated to Rhodes had already been removed from the building.

The statue’s removal had been called for by a student campaign group known as Oxford Rhodes Must Fall (ORMF). The group complained that the statue’s presence was “a celebration of his [Rhodes’] triumphs.”

The campaign to remove the Rhodes statue has caused widespread confusion. A survey conducted by Oxford’s student newspaper *Cherwell* revealed that 37 percent of students were for the removal of the statue, while 54 percent were against. Almost equal numbers of the college’s black and minority ethnic (BAME) students were for and against the removal of the statue. More revealing still, 51 percent of the BAME students commented that the statue’s removal would not affect their experience at Oxford.

The governing body of Oriel College, owner of the statue, said it would retain it with the proviso that there be added “a clear historical context to explain why it is there,” with reference to “the complexity of history and of the legacies of colonialism still felt today.”

ORMF also calls for the university to “decolonise” its campus.

Rhodes is a major figure in the history of British imperialism and its crimes. He was the founder of Rhodesia (now Zambia and Zimbabwe) and of the De Beers diamond mining corporation in South Africa. He believed that the Anglo-Saxon race was “the first race in the world,” destined to bring civilisation through settlement and colonialism, i.e., the building of the British Empire.

Rhodes pursued his commercial interests in South Africa by ruthlessly pushing the local black population from its land. His effort to incorporate the Boer-held territories into a British-ruled unified state was the major cause of the Boer War of 1899-1902.

Lenin noted in his seminal work, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, the profound connection between Rhodes’ commitment to empire and his fear of social revolution.

Rhodes said in 1895: “I was in the East End of London [a working-class quarter] yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed. I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for ‘bread! bread!’ and on my way home I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism.... My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide

new markets for the goods produced in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.”

However, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign is far away from being a genuine expression of anti-imperialist sentiment. Indeed its focus on the removal of a statue is bound up with a political agenda that utilizes racial rather than socialist politics to conceal the pro-capitalist orientation of its leading figures.

To understand the class interests Rhodes Must Fall represents, it is necessary to examine its origins in South Africa. In March 2015, the ORMF’s parent organization first called for the removal of a statue of Rhodes from Cape Town University (CTU). One of the movement’s leaders, Kgotsi Chikane, is a son of Reverend Frank Chikane, chief of staff to former African National Congress (ANC) President Thabo Mbeki. He linked calls for the statue’s removal to the appointment of black professors and members of the faculty.

Chikane junior showed up for an interview with the *Guardian* wearing a t-shirt bearing the logo of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, which awarded him his university scholarship. “This is my inherent contradiction in life,” he told the newspaper. “I enjoy mocking Rhodes and yet he pays my university fees.”

There is no contradiction at all.

The marriage of the Mandela and Rhodes foundations speaks to the alliance between South Africa’s mainly white capitalist elite and the black political elite. In the mid-1980s, when the South African ruling class began its negotiations with Nelson Mandela and the ANC on ending apartheid, the country was in deep economic crisis and teetering on the brink of civil war. The government felt compelled to impose a state of emergency, having lost control of the black working class townships.

The international and South African mining corporations, banks and other firms, together with the most conscious elements within the apartheid regime, recognized that the ANC—and Mandela in particular—were the only ones capable of quelling a revolutionary upheaval. They formed an alliance that ended in the demise of formal apartheid but left capitalism and the domination of the imperialist banks and multinationals intact—on the understanding that a layer of the black petty-bourgeoisie would be enriched through the ANC’s policies of Black Economic Empowerment.

In return, before taking office, Mandela and the ANC ditched large parts of the movement’s programme, particularly those planks relating to public ownership of the banks, mines and major

industries. They signed a secret letter of intent with the International Monetary Fund pledging to implement free market policies, including drastic budget cuts, high interest rates and the scrapping of all barriers to the penetration of international capital.

Throughout its 20 years in power, the ANC has overseen a collapse in living standards, offering up South African workers as a cheap labour force to global corporations. Around 12 million people currently live in extreme poverty, earning less than \$2.34 a day. In contrast, according to a report by Thomas Piketty, the black middle class in south Africa grew from 300,000 in 1993 to 3 million in 2012, and blacks' share of the middle class increased from 11 percent to 41 percent.

This is the social layer represented by the Rhodes Must Fall campaign—specifically drawn from sections of former ANC loyalists and their coalition partners in the Stalinist South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) who are now seeking to portray themselves as a “left” opposition under conditions of widespread discontent among workers and young people.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), currently the third-largest party in South Africa, for example, was founded in 2013 by expelled ANC youth league member and millionaire Julius Malema.

Malema has been vocal in the Cape Town University RMF campaign, addressing students at Witwatersrand University on the next steps the campaign should take.

The campaign at Oxford was founded by graduate Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, who is the son of Dali Mpofu, national chairperson of the Economic Freedom Fighters. Mpofu's biography matches those of the other privileged, conservative figures who have been promoted as the leaders of the student movement, with the specific goal of channeling anger along racial lines—claiming that by increasing the number of blacks in privileged positions the problems of capitalist society will be resolved.

Last year the RMF campaign at Cape Town came to the defence of Mcebo Dlamini, president of Witwatersrand University's Student Representative Council. In a Facebook post last April, Dlamini stated that he loved Hitler. In an interview with Joanne Joseph on eNCA news, he declared, “Every white person has an element of Adolf Hitler [in them];” whereas, “A black man can't be racist because we don't have power and we don't have influence.”

By this logic, figures like United States President Barack Obama, who has an army, nuclear weapons and the power to assassinate anyone he chooses, is still inferior to the white homeless man sleeping in the alleyways of New York. Closer to home it portrays those guilty of perpetuating the super-exploitation of the South African working class as victims rather than oppressors.

Dlamini later delivered an anti-Semitic rant in a radio interview, saying that Jews were “devils.” The Rhodes Must Fall campaign came to Dlamini's defence, declaring a desire to “dispel the constant cries that white students make referring to our statements as ‘reverse racism’.”

Dlamini has since aligned himself explicitly with the ANC.

The export of the RMF campaign to Oxford underscores its class

character. The Oxford campaign is led by masters degree students Mpofu and Ntokozo Qwabe, both of whom have benefited from the Rhodes scholarship programme. When critics pointed this out to Qwabe, he replied, “I am taking back some of the loot [that Rhodes] took from my continent, my people.”

Of course, no worker in South Africa will ever benefit from the Rhodes scholarship programme. Rather, Qwabe's idea of wealth redistribution is to take some of the money looted by the imperialist powers and to divert it into his own pocket—all in the name of “my people.”

In an interview with the *Sunday Times*, Qwabe stated, “These [Oxford's colleges] are OUR institutions and we have every right to challenge them to change so as to reflect OUR realities.”

This is how Qwabe refers to one of the two major educational bastions of British imperialism—a college that saw the withdrawal of £1.5 million in donations as a result of the campaign to remove the statue of Rhodes and which was reportedly threatened with the loss of a further £100 million from benefactors if the statue was indeed removed.

That he sees Oxford's colleges as “our” institutions says everything that needs to be said about the real political aims of the campaign's organisers—to integrate themselves into the structures of imperialist and capitalist rule.

The British bourgeoisie pursued a strategy of cultivating relations with representatives of the local elites through institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge universities and Sandhurst Royal Military Academy when it presided over an empire. It never abandoned this policy, recognising the value of building strong political bonds to facilitate trade, investment and military cooperation.

Last month Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron made one of his occasional attempts to project a progressive image, urging Oxford to step up its efforts to encourage “diversity” with Downing Street, citing a plan to publish data “showing the ethnic, gender and socio-economic breakdown for applications, entry, and retention in key disciplines at all higher education institutions.”

Cameron noted as an example that Oxford accepted only 27 black British students in a single year.

This is the social reality of Oxford and similar institutions. The desire of a privileged layer of black students, whether from overseas or the UK, to take down a few statues, give them or their peers positions as lecturers and make alterations to the syllabus to stress issues of race and identity does not change this situation, and has nothing to do with a struggle against either the legacy of imperialism or its contemporary reality.



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