



A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

By *Ben Turok*

Since 2010, *New Agenda* has given special coverage to youth and student issues. We have published interviews with leaders of SASCO and SAUS and held meetings with student leaders at UCT and CPUT. Unfortunately, our efforts were unproductive as these organisations were not firmly rooted in students and their concerns. There seemed to be a preoccupation with gaining positions in the SRCs, although even winning office did not seem to lead anywhere. Given the universities' ingrained conservatism and white hegemony, these student institutions and organisations seemed to be vehicles of cooption and frustration. And so it was that Rhodes Must Fall and the dramatic events that followed took us by surprise. We will all remember 21 October 2015 as a crucial moment in our political history.

It is therefore with appreciation that we received Leigh-Ann Naidoo's article on the emergence of the 2015 student uprising, which articulates the driving philosophy of this important movement. Naidoo makes some very important points concerning the role of black consciousness and Pan-Africanism in the student struggle; the alliance of various student formations across the country on agreed issues; the rejection of both party-aligned politics and reformist SRCs; the convergence that emerged between the movement, SRCs,



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workers and staff; a "radical praxis" that rejects the division between "leaders" and "followers"; and that the "born-frees" are no longer willing to accept the limitations of the formal democracy they have inherited.

Politics in South Africa has yet to digest the import of these positions. In particular, the ANC and its organs will have to indicate clearly their stance on this movement, as will all other political formations. Through years of neglecting student affairs, the token support offered to student formations, and the ANC's preoccupation with its own Youth League, the liberation

movement has been seriously derelict in its responsibility to these students.

The student movement is obviously correct to point out that our best universities are not pursuing transformation to become relevant South African and African institutions of higher learning, but continue to mimic Oxbridge and European traditions in their governance and, in many cases, their curricula.

The protest movement of students must be welcomed as a breath of fresh air. However, we do need to caution against the lack of organised structures, the vague or nostalgic recall of black consciousness, and the failure to analyse the fundamental structure of political economy that created the colonial edifice they condemn. How on earth will we remove the legacy of colonialism if we do not understand the mechanics of that structure?

We also have some concern for their dismissal of the struggle for reforms as insignificant, and the rejection of formal political party formations. Ours is a country steeped in struggle by political organisations with long histories. They will not go away and – even if they are not responding properly to present needs – their presence remains important. Perhaps, rather than going it alone, the student movement should place their demands squarely before these movements and insist on proper support. **NA**