

UNFREE IN THE FREE STATE

AN INTERVIEW WITH TREVOR SHAKU



Trevor Shaku

‘Manapo ‘Mokose, IFAA Student Intern spoke to Trevor Shaku who is studying towards a postgraduate certificate in education at the University of the Free State (UFS) in Bloemfontein. He is the national secretary of the Socialist Youth Movement and spokesperson for the Workers and Students Forum at UFS.

‘MANAPO ‘MOKOSE: What is your association with the Fees Must Fall movement?

TREVOR SHAKU: I was part of the national Fees Must Fall (FMF) movement meetings which took place immediately after the wave of protests that engulfed the country in October

2015. We met in Johannesburg for three meetings on November 27th, December 1st and again from the 11th to the 13th of December. I’m part of that movement, and I participate in two capacities, as a UFS [University of the Free State] student and as a member of SYM [the Socialist Youth Movement].

MM: I assume there are different goals with each university, and different problems. What was your contribution from the University of the Free State?

TS: True to the national Fees Must Fall movement, we at UFS fought to halt the proposed fee increment of 2015. But most importantly, the movement was the beginning of a wave that would eventually have to bring about free education to the poor. Insourcing [contract workers on campus] continues to be an important element, as reflected in the development of the Workers and Student Alliance. With regard to distinctions between universities, at UFS we have a problem of racism. While it is reflective of



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the situation in the country, other universities, especially liberal universities, do not face the question of racism as we do. On top of that we fight for institutional reforms, not only relating to the question of colour but to questions of gender.

MM: What inspired you to take action? Was it the FMF action at Wits University?

TS: There was a build-up of events before Wits, orchestrated by student organisations and especially student leaders at UFS who saw themselves as revolutionaries. There were less than twenty of us at the time. First of all, we reflected on the situation on our campus and realised that there is a lot of political apathy among students, and that it would take not only education per se, but mainly action on the ground. So we formulated a group called the Socialist Student Front. That was around May, June, July. And then, in September, Steve Hofmeyr [an Afrikaans pop singer known for his racist views] came to perform at Kopsie Kerk [Church] in Bloemfontein, and we staged a little picket there. We were mainly trying to convey the message that the university cannot associate itself with such racists, as the church [property] belongs to the university.

For me, that was the catalytic event that built up momentum among students *before* the FMF campaign. The Wits FMF campaign helped to augment the programme and broadened participation. Since then, most of the students who took action have remained in student politics or ➤



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student activism and continue to fight for issues that confront our campus.

MM: What concerns do you have about the student movement?

TS: At the national Fees Must Fall meetings that succeeded the October campaign, the question of the identity and organisation of the movement came up but there were no conclusive resolutions. Mine and a few other comrades' contention was that the movement must be socialist in identity, but we were defeated after all. Regarding the form of the organisation itself, they said that it must be left as loose as it was – without leadership and without structures, although we knew that they existed in an informal sense. There was no programme concluded up there that systematically detailed what should be done, at what time and who, for example, must initiate the protests. The universities were to go at will and do as they wish.

For me, that was a bit counter-revolutionary, because you cannot begin to try to tackle an issue but leave the question of organisation unresolved. If the question of organisation is unresolved, you're not going to be able to mobilise adequately, because it is the organisation or the

structures which must be responsible for mobilisation. I blame that weakness for the wavering period in the recent wave of students' struggles towards free education. The weakness of not having structures, the weakness of not having a leadership, and the weakness of not having a programme. This year, many students were victimised, brutalised by the police and the heavy securitisation of their universities. Because of our weaknesses, our comrades were arrested and we were not effectively able to mobilise legal and financial resources to bail them out.

We need to seriously sit down and formulate a programme for the student movement. It could continue as it is, open for everyone, but have pillars that it knows that it is committed to fighting for. Regarding leadership, there is hostility towards the word "leadership" because it has assumed this connotation of hegemony. If our aim is to have the FMF remain as organic as it is – embraced by many people or students from across higher education institutions – perhaps we should reconfigure the meaning of leadership for us. But leadership nonetheless must be there.

MM: We don't hear much about what is happening at UFS. Why is that, and what are you doing about it?

TS: I'll attribute that to three things. The first one is that Bloemfontein generally is not a hub of media industry. As a result, we struggle to get coverage on the issues that we fight on, and if something is not at a crisis point, usually we do not even get that coverage. The second thing is that there's little alliance between the academic staff of this university and the students. One of the things that I have seen at Wits or at UCT is that the researchers and academics have taken up our questions and written about them. We don't have that cohesion

at UFS. Thirdly, we students are the problem. We're not writing. We usually shout slogans like "We are on our own". But if we are on our own and we don't write our stories, who do we expect to write them?

As for what we're doing to change this condition, there has already been a good development within the university. An initiative that unites students and staff members has been developed, called the Progressive Academic and Staff Forum. I believe that, through it, in future we will be able to align ourselves with them and that they will take an interest in writing about our cause in their research. I have been writing extensively for The Journalist (thejournalist.org.za) and also calling on my comrades to write and to debate on mutual issues of concern. Regarding the media, that one is difficult. We don't have any measure at hand that will ensure that they pay attention to us. What we can do is make more noise through social media and attract media houses that way. In the meantime, we do as much as possible to publicise events on social media.

MM: As a student in the movement, what would you like South Africa to know?

TS: One, I want South Africans to know that first and foremost our cause, the one we are fighting for, is legitimate. We're not a group organising a coup d'état. We are a group that is concerned about the livelihood of our people.



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We're fighting for free education, not because it's fashionable to do so but because it's a necessity for the poor majority, which is predominantly black, to access universities and other institutions of higher learning without any hindrance or financial difficulty.

Number two, that our commitment to the struggle extends beyond fees and free education because the university, as a centre of knowledge production, also needs to be changed. We have seen the production of pseudo-science ideologies, or pseudo-science theories which engulfed the globe during colonialism. Eugenics, social Darwinism and scientific racism theories, for instance, were produced within academic spheres and were used to persuade people that some groups were superior and others inferior. That paradigm continues to this day. The university as a centre of knowledge has a lot to contribute to that and to change perspectives. Universities produce a paradigm. That paradigm must be beneficial to society.

Thirdly, there are many facets to our movement. On this campus, I have led outsourced workers alongside a few comrades in the Workers and Students Forum. Through the Forum, we were able to organise workers here at UFS and lead them to win a minimum wage of R5000 – up from R2500 – and a commitment by management to insource. The negotiations for that are underway. We have given the workers confidence. Previously, they were exploited and they suffered quietly for fear of being dismissed. But now they have taken control of their workspaces. They are able to challenge their employers on a verbal but also legal basis. I am there regularly, with a few of my comrades – especially from SYM – to assist them in terms of the daily issues they face with their employers.

MM: What do you see as failures, whether individually, as FMF, or the SYM?



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TS: So far, a failure is hard to find. What we've always wanted is vibrant political activism on our campus and we've got that. A challenge – not a failure – is that we're struggling to educate the student constituency. "Educating" not in the sense of indoctrinating, but opening up a space where there is love for learning and love for debates. We haven't arrived at that level yet, which presents a very huge potential detriment to our movement and the vibrant space that we have established so far. Because of inadequate content, student campaigns can miscalculate the landscape and balance of forces of a period and fail to prepare adequately for it.

Further, there's a lot of phrase-mongering within the student movement and amongst the so-called leaders of our campuses. They take books and raid them for quotes, thinking that quoting Sankara or Nkrumah makes you revolutionary. Meanwhile, you're just a person who memorises, who does not digest the things that he or she reads. And without digesting the things you read, you can't translate them effectively to your cause. So, there will be a wrong diagnosis of the problem. We've seen it already. For example, campaigns have been reduced to campuses when they should be directed straight to the government, because that's where

the problem originates. Especially campaigns like fighting for free education. A rector cannot give us free education.

MM: The theme of this special youth issue of *New Agenda* is *Born free, born in chains*. Does that inspire any sort of reflection?

TS: Indeed. We are born in chains. The statement awakens us to the realities that we are facing in South Africa and calls for us to stand up and challenge the myth of the "born frees". The born-free mentality has been propagated as a political strategy of the ANC and the ruling alliance, alongside its "rainbow nation" message, to say that we do not have to fight because we are free. But reality is saying quite the opposite. We can see that, so much as there was a political concession or a compromise during the CODESA [Convention for a Democratic South Africa] negotiations which resulted in the 1994 elections, we are only free to do things in principle, but in reality we are not able to do so. You are free to go to school anywhere you want, but because of financial difficulties, you can't do that. You are free to access health services, but you can't do so because your socio-economical status does not permit you. So indeed, we are not born free, we are born in chains.

MM: What is freedom to you?

TS: Freedom to me would be when we are free to do everything indeed. That, if they say we are in a freedom dispensation, I can go to school for free, I can access health services for free. These are basic needs. For me, in fact, I say only socialism means freedom. All that we see today is just bogus liberal democracy that is trying to sugar-coat the real meaning, or the real essence, of freedom for the people because most of the things, they are not in fact even free to do. **NA**