

South African Higher Education Students Win Moratorium on Tuition Hikes

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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Universities remain closed as protests continue at University of Witwatersrand and other campuses

South African President Jacob Zuma announced a moratorium on tuition increases of six percent on Oct. 23. These fee hikes were scheduled to go into effect for 2016 as Africa's most industrialized state faces a burgeoning economic crisis of sluggish growth and increasing uncertainty in the labor market.

The President's proclamation came amid the closing of universities across the country after two weeks of protests on campuses in Pretoria, Fort Hare, Johannesburg, Cape Town and other cities and towns across the country. A twitter message #feesmustfall became a rallying cry for students throughout South Africa as they walked off campuses to demonstrate in the streets, at the parliament building in Cape Town, the Union Building in Pretoria and even outside the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party headquarters at Luthuli House.

At the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, one of premier higher educational institutions in South Africa, administrators shut down the campus after protests on October 14. These demonstrations rapidly spread to other campuses leading to the closure of many other universities and colleges during the week of October 19.

The Witwatersrand Acting Student Representative Council President, Shaera Kalla, placed the unrest within a broader context saying, "There is a majority of black students every year who are academically excluded from this university, and financially excluded from this university. That, that is the reality and we are tired of that reality."

Due to the demonstrations, government officials and vice chancellors, who had been meeting in Durban during the National Education Summit to discuss the state of higher education, were taken off guard by the protests. Witwatersrand University's Vice Chancellor, Professor Adam Habib, was compelled to leave the conference and immediately return to Johannesburg and meet with disgruntled students.

At Witwatersrand which in the center of the nationwide dispute had proposed increases in registration, tuition and accommodation fees by an average of 10-percent for the following year.

Despite the announcement of a moratorium on fee increases, the student protests continued on October 26. At Witwatersrand, a university senate meeting designed to discuss the resumption of the academic program where lectures and examinations are pending, was disrupted by student activists demanding that the issue of free university education and

other demands be addressed.

An article published by the South African Mail & Guardian said “Most university campuses around the country had decided to continue with protests, despite an announcement by President Jacob Zuma on Friday to put a moratorium on 2016 fee hikes. The students argued that only one of their several demands had been agreed to (fees not rising) following a march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria on Friday. They are demanding free education for all and that universities stop the outsourcing of staff and services.” (Oct. 26)

Education Reflects Broader Societal Challenges

The problems in higher education affordability is a manifestation of the increasing economic crisis in South Africa where the government, due to its adoption of neo-liberal policies, has been unable to implement free education, a mandate of the Freedom Charter from six decades ago.

Since the ANC took power in 1994 the amount of assistance to students pursuing post-secondary education has increased substantially. Nevertheless, these measures have not been adequate to meet the demands of the working class and poor communities.

In addition, the university system in South Africa allows individual schools to determine internal governance issues such as fee increases, student and labor affairs. Many aspects of the former apartheid system of institutional racism and class bias remain within the functional framework of education.

On October 21, when the Minister of Finance Nhlanelo Nene was delivering the midterm budget before parliament in Cape Town, thousands of students were demonstrating outside the building insisting that their concerns be addressed. Police used riot control techniques involving teargas to disperse the crowds where some had begun to storm the security fences and stone security personnel.

Nene’s report indicated that the national debt has grown from 26 percent to 47 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) since the 2008-9 global economic crises when South Africa instituted countercyclical measures to combat the downturn. The growth of debt-service is a major concern for bond ratings agencies which can determine the cost of borrowing and the interests of foreign capital in investing in the national economy.

These developments are aggravated by the decline in the value of the national currency (rand) which has slipped to the level of 13-1 against the United States dollar. Nene emphasized during his speech that “Our projection is that debt will rise by a further R600-billion (approximately \$US50 billion) over the next three years, while stabilizing as a percentage of GDP.”

Increasing at an average annual rate of 10.9 percent, debt-service is the South African government’s fastest growing expense. Many of these difficulties stem directly from the declining prices for commodity exports and the ongoing capitalist relations of production where private business interests are seeking to cut labor costs amid the decline in the currency values.

Debate Intensifies Inside the Tripartite Alliance

The Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr. Blade Nzimande, who is also the Secretary General of the South African Communist Party (SACP), has been criticized for not taking decisive action in solving the problems of increasing fees. It was reported in the South African press that some of the youth leaders, including the newly-elected ANC Youth League President Collen Maine, has called for Nzimande's resignation.

Others within the ANC-SACP and Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU) alliance have rejected what they describe as the "scapegoating" of Nzimande, saying that the problems of higher education cannot be assessed independent of the overall crisis in the capitalist system. Nzimande in an interview said that even though the higher education sector is largely funded through state revenues, the private sector must increase support for universities.

"There is enough money in this country. The problem is that a lot of it is in the private sector," Nzimande told the South African press agency eNCA. "Your richer universities had committed that they are going to dip into some of their reserves to support this. And then the rest were saying it will have to come from government, but we've got to look at all sources that are possible both inside and outside government, as well as your rich universities, because not all universities can afford to pay even a cent towards this." (Oct. 26)

A wide ranging debate has been initiated on the character of the situation where the SACP, ANC, along with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the Democratic Alliance (DA) and other opposition parties have taken varying positions. Accusations from elements within the ANC and the SACP say that they support the demand for free education. However, there could very well be other political aspects to the unrest and views surrounding the demonstrations.

A polemic between the SACP and the ANC has come to the surface surrounding the National General Council of the ruling party held during October 8-11. The African Communist, one of the theoretical journals of the SACP, has openly criticized the program of the General Council in its third quarter issue saying that there needs to be a move away from neo-liberal economic policy through larger state spending geared toward re-correcting the legacy of apartheid and colonialism.

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