

like schools and clinics, it is misleading to talk of “renaissance”.

The battle between farmers and Shoprite in Chipata is not an isolated incident. Across the world, foreign multinationals are penetrating local markets and wiping out small farmers and local traders. This has prompted the emergence of an international NGO movement called “Fairtrade” which aims to protect local economic communities.

When farmers in Chipata protested against Shoprite’s presence, their action mirrored global processes. And their plight calls into question South Africa’s regional role. The claims of African renewal through South African leadership rings hollow if the impact of South African companies is to eliminate local production systems. To market five vegetables produced by small Zambian farmers, of the 200 vegetables on Shoprite’s shelves, should not be too much to ask as a service to local economic development.

Because of uneven regional development, powerful South African corporations can dictate to other economies in Southern Africa. And post-nationalist governments in the region are too weak to regulate them. Under the banner of Nepad, South Africa’s past as regional bully-boy continues to be reproduced and entrenched.

LB

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British academics not scared to take action

Chris Bolsman used to teach at the University of Johannesburg where it was unheard of for academic staff to go on strike. In Britain, however, this is becoming more common. Here he describes industrial action in British universities earlier this year in which he participated.

It rained and rained and rained on the day of the official one day strike in March this year. It was so wet our leaflets and placards disintegrated in our hands as we stood on the picket line. Around 20 activists gathered from 7:30 in the morning outside the main entrances of Aston University in the centre of Birmingham, with others joining later.

During the course of the four hours we spent in the rain, we handed out over 3 500 leaflets many of which were to people attending a graduation ceremony. Throughout the morning, many of those who passed the picket line, including students, were sympathetic to the cause. At lunch time we left the picket line to join comrades at a regional rally bringing together activists from across the West Midlands. Members of the national executive of the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and student leaders addressed over 200 activists. The messages called for student and teacher unity in the struggle against

the marketisation of higher education in Britain. This message was repeated at rallies across Britain.

This is the story of that dispute.

BACKGROUND TO DISPUTE

The University and College Union (UCU) represents post-school academic and academic-related staff in British higher and further education. It has a membership of 120 000 which makes it the world’s largest post-school education union.

The UCU is one of the largest affiliates of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in Britain and was set up in June 2006 after the merger of the AUT and the National Association for Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE). These unions, and now the UCU, are responsible for negotiating pay and conditions at almost all further and higher education institutions in Britain.

Prior to the merger, the AUT and NATFHE took part in long negotiations and industrial action around a national pay deal. British

and European Union students previously paid up to £1,250 per year to study at British universities. Following an extensive debate, the government raised this to variable rates of up to £3,000 per year starting in October 2006. This was an unpopular decision and was fought by the National Union of Students and the university unions. At the time, the higher education minister, Alan Johnston remarked that university vice-chancellors had said that a third of the newly generated money would be paid into salaries for university staff. Additional income would amount to £3.5 billion which would provide an opportunity to reverse the decline in academic salaries.

After the changes had been approved the Universities and College Employers Association (UCEA) representing the vice-chancellors said there had been no agreement on staff salaries and that no national increase was possible.

THE DISPUTE

In October 2005 the unions submitted pay demands for 2006 that amounted to a third of additional money coming into the sector. Employers rejected the demands and a formal dispute was declared by AUT in December and NATFHE declared a dispute the following month.

In January 2006, the AUT demanded an increase of between 20 and 23% over three years and balloted their members on industrial action. Around 50% of union members voted, with 80% in favour of industrial action and a one day strike.

Academic and related staff went out on strike on 7 March. Lectures were cancelled across many British



universities and in some instances students joined staff on picket lines. Afternoon rallies were held around the country and in the West Midlands around 200 unionists met at the University of Birmingham to report back on the events of the day and discuss the way forward. The one day strike was seen as symbolic as in many cases students could catch up on missed lectures and universities could return to normal. Following the one day's action, action short of a strike took place for an indefinite period. This would have far more serious consequences for the employers, staff and students.

Talks were scheduled for later in the month, however the employers demanded that unions suspend their action. The unions stood firm and the employers offered 6% over two years. During the previous

years' negotiations 3% had been agreed. The employers however refused to take into account the extra income that would be generated through increased overseas fees.

During this period it was revealed that vice-chancellors had awarded themselves salary increases of 25%. In some instances this amounted to salaries of over ten times that of average university wages. Many vice-chancellors earn in excess of £200 000 per year. Informal talks between the unions and UCEA took place with no movement on the part of the employers.

AUT's action short of a strike included a boycott of assessment and examination activity, a refusal to honour established call-out arrangements such as staff who would not come in to help if

computers were down, a boycott of staff appraisal schemes and a refusal to cover for absent colleagues. NATFHE's action entailed going ahead with setting exams but withholding results. This action had far more damaging consequences than the one day strike as students could not sit or have their exams marked and in certain instances could not graduate.

University managers expressed fears that Britain's recruitment of overseas students who contribute substantial finances to the sector would be compromised. Around 120 members of parliament signed a motion backing the unions' demands.

Within universities considerable debate with students and colleagues took place. In many instances students were overwhelmingly in support of the unions' demands. At the national level, the NUS (National Union of Students) supported the action. However, in some cases individual student unions expressed their concern that the unions' action of assessment boycotts and the non-setting of exams would have a negative impact on students especially as they were not part of the decision-making process.

Informal meetings between local union associations and student unions continued. At many institutions employers threatened unionists with the docking of their wages and that they may be sued. In certain cases, lists were circulated of individual union activists who in turn were called in by senior management and pay deduction was threatened if the action continued past a certain period. They labelled such activists as militants and part of the ultra left.

In addition, members on strike felt the pressure of no longer being protected after 12 weeks of industrial action. British labour law protects striking workers for three months only.

The University of Warwick was the first to deliver the threat of pay docking to striking members. This amounted to 20% of wages. The University of Birmingham was the first to dock pay followed by Sunderland, Coventry and Strathclyde. Universities docked pay of members who had engaged in any industrial action.

Soon universities around the country began to feel the real impact of the action. The University of Keele compromised academic standards when it decided to permit students to graduate without the completion of their final year. At the universities of Aberdeen and St Andrews, management offered local

deals to union branches. National union leadership rejected these offers and reiterated its commitment to national pay bargaining.

In many instances exams were cancelled. The sociology group at Aston University (where the writer is based) did not set exams as the deadline for exam papers fell after the start of the action. During the run-up to exams these academics constantly communicated with students informing them of any new developments. They informed students two days before the set date that exams were highly unlikely to take place. A number of exams were not sat at Aston and also at numerous universities around the country. There were a few instances of students venting their frustrations and disapproval of union tactics, but the overwhelming majority of students were fully

