

# Is education an essential service?

## Numsa says no

The crisis in education will not be solved by denying teachers their rights but by addressing the legacies of colonialism and apartheid that relegated blacks and Africans to the bottom of the pile in human development, writes **Irvin Jim**.

**T**he first illusion to dissolve is the obvious fact that post-1994 South Africa does not have one, unified harmonious education system that enjoys equal standards of both the quality of education and infrastructure, at all levels and types.

It is important to make it clear where the so-called 'crisis of education' is located within the system itself. Once the education crisis is properly located, it is then crucial to explain the real historic and continuing causes and drivers of this crisis. Only then can any meaningful programmes of transformation be drawn.

Any attempt to ignore or minimise the task of first honestly and correctly locating the crisis in the education system, its historic and continuing causes and drivers' leads to the extremely hypocritical but dangerous, white supremacist racist analysis. This analysis very simplistically places the blame on the quality of teaching and leadership in parts of the education system which are in a deep crisis.

Numsa refuses to be bullied and blackmailed into adopting this shallow, superficial, white supremacist racist analysis of the education crisis post-1994. This analysis places the blame of the

failure to resolve and transform the education system at the feet of black and African teachers in general and ultimately at the black and African population in particular, purportedly for behaving in ways which generate and worsen the crisis.

Numsa fully agrees with Cosatu's excellent critique of the National Planning Commission's (NDP) Diagnostic Report in which the federation correctly locates the education crisis in the education system for blacks, especially African.

We all know that the education system for the white South African community is by and large fairly advanced and does not experience the same quality, infrastructure and other problems that are common in all the African working-class communities.

While we all can pick out most of the factors that make the education system not to function, it is absolutely essential and necessary to the resolution of the crisis that we must simultaneously and honestly provide an answer as to why the crisis finds expression in the African part of the schooling system and not in the white one.

Once we have identified the location of the epicentre of the crisis in the black aspect of the education system, this logically leads us to the

fundamental question: how is it that, almost 20 years in a democracy, the education system in black communities is not working, while in the white community it is the opposite and even comparable to that of European countries?

Like Cosatu, we must ask: why is it that 'good principals' are hard to come by in African schools but are plenty in white schools? Why are teachers in African schools spending less time at school than those in white schools? Why is it that African communities are not mobilised to support their schools whilst the white community seems to take interest?

Why is it that African schools have extremely inferior infrastructure compared to white schools?

Why is it that the majority of African learners come from extremely poor communities in which high unemployment, violence against children and women and all sorts of other social ills are widespread?

Why is it that at birth, an African child is 18 times more likely to be poor than a white child?

Why is it that the majority of black and African children go to school hungry, post-1994?

To answer these questions, we must never refuse or be bullied



*Numsa general secretary Irvin Jim.*

into pretending that post-1994 South Africa has suddenly gotten rid of its past. To do so is to yield to the powerful continuing white supremacist and shallow behavioural analysis.

Such an analysis conceals the origins and continuing character of the post-1994 period.

### COLONIALISM OF A SPECIAL TYPE

The South African Communist Party (SACP), 7th Congress in 1989, provides a useful summary of the origins of present-day white racist, patriarchal (male-dominated) and capitalism:

'The South African capitalist state did not emerge as a result of an internal popular anti-feudal revolution. It was imposed from above and from without. From its birth through to the present, South African capitalism has depended heavily on the imperialist centres. Capital from Europe financed the opening of the mines.

'It was the colonial state that provided the resources to build the basic infrastructure - railways, roads, harbours, posts and telegraphs. It was an imperial army of occupation that created the conditions for political unification. And it was within a colonial setting that the emerging South African capitalist

class entrenched and extended the racially exclusive system to increase its opportunities for profit. The racial division of labour, the battery of racist laws and political exclusiveness guaranteed this.

'From these origins a pattern of domination, which arose in the period of external colonialism, was carried over into the newly-formed Union of South Africa. From its origins to the present, this form of domination has been maintained under changing conditions and by varying mechanisms.

'In all essential respects, however, the colonial status of the black majority has remained in place. Therefore we characterise our society as colonialism of a special type.'

### WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THIS?

- 'South Africa' was born out of the violent European destruction of the lives and economies of the local African populations, who were racially oppressed and dominated.
- The origins of modern capitalist South Africa lie in an imported capitalist revolution - imperialism financed and provided the military means to establish the modern racist, patriarchal and capitalist South Africa.

- The original white South African capitalist class was born within a colonial setting.
- To increase its opportunities for profits, the South African capitalist revolution relied on the white supremacist racial division of labour, which was coded into a battery of white racist laws and political racial exclusiveness.
- From its origins to the present, white racial domination has been maintained under changing conditions and by various means, but it has always been the backbone of South African capitalism and its society.
- In all essential respects, however, the colonial status of the African majority has remained in place.

Although in 1910 the white settler community in South Africa won political freedom from British colonialism, black people remained in a colonial relationship to the white settlers through a system of white racial domination. It is this reality of internal white racial domination of black people in general and Africans in particular that correctly led the SACP to characterise South Africa as 'colonialism of a special type'.

Apartheid gave this white racial domination of Africans its formal ideology. So began the process of turning millions of Africans into the present-day South African working class.

We see, then, that Africans not only lost their land and independent economic means, they were reduced to serving the interests of white capitalists and the white community in order to survive.

Thus an education system appropriate for the purposes of serving white capitalists (supplying cheap, largely semi-skilled and unskilled labour, and domestic workers) and the white community was constructed for the black and Africa working class, and rural African populations.

Any efforts to minimise, distort, ignore or underplay, today, these historic causes and continuing drivers of the crisis of development for the majority of South Africans (who are by and large black and African) in general and the crisis in the black and African part of the education system simply serves to strengthen the continuing colonial character of the place and lives of black and African people. Such efforts support white domination of South Africa, notwithstanding the small sprinkling of a black and African middle class, post-1994.

It is in fact in recognition of this glaring continuing colonial character of the lives of black and African people – notwithstanding the ‘democratic breakthrough’ in 1994 – that the ANC, at its Mangaung 2012 Conference, has acknowledged that the time has come to make a priority and fast-track the economic development of black and African people in South Africa. The task is simply to destroy the colonial character of the lives of millions of black and African South Africans, in relation to the white population and a small black and African middle class.

### CONTINUING COLONIAL INJUSTICE

In its brilliant critique of the NDP Diagnostic Report, Cosatu prophetically, states:

‘The NPC statement about teachers is two-fold. Teachers are not supported but teachers are also ill-disciplined, period. They engage in strike action, they hide behind complex labour regulations, they hold union meetings during school hours. In short, the implication is that part of the problem with the education system is the labour market dispensation that governs the education system.

‘Logically the reform that will be proposed is to either ban strike action or place teachers under essential services (as the Democratic Alliance (DA) has suggested), introduce flexibility in the education

labour market by making it easy to hire and fire teachers, limit unionisation of teachers or devise ways to make it difficult for teacher unions to operate in the education system. If this is the direction that the NPC will be taking, we wish to remind them of the Freedom Charter: *Teachers shall have all the rights of other citizens.*

By proposing to declare education an essential service, the ANC succumbs to the demands of the white supremacist DA which seeks to perpetuate the colonial status of Africans everywhere, and especially in education.

We can here only repeat what the only viable programme – the Freedom Charter – says in order to end the colonial status of Africans, and establish a truly equal and democratic South Africa:

*The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth!*

*The national wealth of our country, the heritage of South Africans, shall be restored to the people;*

*The mineral wealth beneath the soil, the Banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole;*

*All other industry and trade shall be controlled to assist the wellbeing of the people;*

*All people shall have equal rights to trade where they choose, to manufacture and to enter all trades, crafts and professions.*

Numsa challenges anyone to prove to us how outside the equitable redistribution of wealth, and productive capacity in South Africa among all the people, as clearly stated in the Freedom Charter, the colonial status, the human inferior status of black and African people to whites can be corrected.

Further, we challenge anyone to dispute the most obvious fact about the education system: that the inferior colonial education of Africans in South Africa is good for sustaining the superior racist

position of the white population and its small sprinkling of black and African people.

The Freedom Charter is very emphatic about what kind of education is required for a truly free and democratic South Africa. It says:

*The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!*

*The government shall discover, develop and encourage national talent for the enhancement of our cultural life;*

*All the cultural treasures of mankind shall be open to all, by free exchange of books, ideas and contact with other lands;*

*The aim of education shall be to teach the youth to love their people and their culture, to honour human brotherhood, liberty and peace;*

*Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children; Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit;*

*Adult illiteracy shall be ended by a mass state education plan;*

*Teachers shall have all the rights of other citizens;*

*The colour bar in cultural life, in sport and in education shall be abolished.*

We expect the ANC to know that only when education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children; higher education and technical training open to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit will the crisis in the African part of the South African education system be resolved.

Clearly declaring education an essential service so that you deny teachers the rights which all other citizens enjoy will not alter the colonial character of the quality of education given to Africans.

Stated differently, it is not because teachers have all the rights which all citizens enjoy that the education of Africans remains colonial and



*Numsa delegates at the 9th National Congress in Durban last year.*

extremely inferior, post-1994.

Disruptions in the education of African children will continue as long as the quality of life and the education of Africans are colonial, in post-1994 South Africa. Surely this most obvious of facts needs no labouring?

Strictly speaking, according to the Freedom Charter, post-1994, every Black and African child must refuse to be given an education inferior to what the white population and its parasitic Black and African middle classes enjoy.

Thus ideally we should have just about all the children in African schools in African working-class communities and rural areas permanently on strike demanding to see evidence of revolutionary measures being put in place to transform the quality of lives of their communities and schools.

Scapegoating teachers' post-1994 for the crisis is a simple white racist cop out of the revolutionary task to destroy the colonial status and character of African lives and their education. It will not make the crisis go away. The crisis will instead grow.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Consistent with the revolutionary teachings of the liberation

movement in general and the ANC itself in particular, the following measures need to be undertaken in order to abolish colonial African education and create a truly unified, equal and democratic South African education system:

- Take revolutionary measures to implement in full, all the provisions of the Freedom Charter, including nationalisation of strategic economic assets and land expropriation without compensation, thus ending once and for all, the colonial status of Africans in South Africa and effectively uprooting racism.
- Redistribute education resources across the entire system.
- Abolish the white colonial and racist three-tiered structure of the education system, which features private institutions, model-C schools, and ordinary public schools in order to redistribute resources towards ordinary public schools in working-class and poor communities, and to equalise quality of education.
- Systematically and consistently inculcate and promote a culture of learning and teaching across the entire system.
- Abolish colonial wages, establish the living wage, and promote

the creation of decent work as a foundation for reconstructing the African family and creating viable human communities in South Africa.

- Promote human rights and make all the socio-economic rights in the constitution justiciable.
- Eliminate race, gender and class oppression and discrimination in all areas of human activity.
- Promote equity – level the playing field for all learners independent of their class, race and gender.

Only such revolutionary measures can guarantee South Africa a truly democratic dispensation, peace and never-ending development and the resolution of the crisis of human development and thus, the resolution of the crisis of education.

Any start-stop gap measures simply postpone the inevitable pain of the implementation of the revolutionary measures to resolve the crisis of human development in South Africa, and its subsidiary, the crisis of education.

Numsa rejects any proposals to declare education an essential service! <sup>LB</sup>

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