

Global Issues

The Coming of a Perfect Storm? “Forced Privatisation” and Precarious Labour in South African Academia

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Inadequate government funding for universities, reduced autonomy, infrastructural decline, falling academic standards, and the politicisation and privatisation of education have led to increasing precarity in academic employment in South Africa, as they have elsewhere in the world (Shrivastava and Shrivastava, 2014).

A recent survey conducted at a leading South African university found increasing casualisation and precarity in academic employment (ASAWU, 2016). Precarisation in this context typically takes the form of poor pay, short-term contract renewals, requests to perform duties outside of work specifications, and wide discrepancies in rates and duration of contracts. These practices often reflect gender disparities, with women particularly vulnerable to casualisation. Individuals typically report a negative impact on morale and working relationships with others on account of their temporary status (ASAWU, 2016).

Importantly, certain structural conditions seem to be driving trends toward precarity in academic work. Key to these trends is the recent systematic underfunding of the country’s university sector (Bozzoli, 2016; Universities South Africa, 2016). Given the more recent political disempowerment of the country’s traditionally strong labour federations (Lindeque, 2017), concerns exist that university management cost-cutting imperatives and the rising precarisation in the country’s universities are increasingly overshadowed by political issues and an increasingly aggressive populist political agenda.

This Global Issues piece seeks to highlight the vulnerability of academic workers to certain contextual changes. On the basis of recent developments, it is argued that these workers currently face a “perfect storm” of contextual forces that threaten the labour gains and the political power of labour federations in the country. Heightened budgetary constraints arguably create conditions akin to forced privatisation, as university managements resort to commercialist and managerialist logics to drive massification and performance in a context of dwindling resources, at increasing human cost.

A University Funding Crisis

Prior to the announcement of free higher education for the poor in December 2017, some were already arguing that the country’s higher education system faced imminent financial collapse, which would have catastrophic consequences for workers in the sector. This announcement came in the wake of the 2015 and 2016 #FeesMustFall student protests over rising fees, which some argued were the result of systematic de-funding of the sector. For example, between 2012/2013 and 2015/2016, on an annual basis there has been a “rapid erosion of the value of the teaching input grant per

student unit”, as was also the case for the teaching output grant (Universities South Africa, 2016: 3). This decrease in state subsidies as a proportion of university income, from 49 per cent in 2000 to 40 per cent in 2014, has intensified challenges of poor management and made universities increasingly dependent on student fees to fund operational shortfalls (Bozzoli, 2016). By 2012, government investment in higher education as a ratio of GDP was 0.71 – less than half of that for China, Cuba, Finland, Ghana, Iceland and Malaysia, and substantially less than Brazil, Chile, India and Senegal; by 2014/2015 this ratio had declined to about .64 (Universities South Africa, 2016). It is within this context that the country’s credit rating was downgraded to “junk status” by Standard and Poor Global in November 2017, following a previous announcement by Fitch, making government loans more expensive, increasing the amount of the government budget to be spent on interest, and reducing funds available for housing, education, healthcare, social grants and other societal state investments (Donnelley, 2017).

South Africa has twenty-six public universities. Under pressure from the ongoing funding crisis, its five research-intensive institutions – the universities of Cape Town, Pretoria, Rhodes, Stellenbosch and the Witwatersrand – face the dilemma of whether to pursue global research recognition or to cater to ever-increasing numbers of students (Dickenson, 2017). According to David Dickinson:

One way to make savings on the sly is the casualisation of the lecturing staff. Increasingly, [the university] is dependent on sessional lecturers and postgraduate tutors. Instead of creating new academic posts in line with increased student numbers, short-term teaching contracts – “sessionals” – are used to plug the gap.... In addition to lecturing, tutoring students in smaller groups is a central part of any academic programme. Ideally this would be done by full-time academics. But at [the university] and elsewhere workloads make this impossible.... The university is being hollowed out ... stealth traps have created a contractual ceiling and sessional teaching has become a trap for young academics – perpetual precarious employment. A cohort of permanently insecure sessional lecturers is being constructed.... the seeds of another university crisis are being sown (Dickenson, 2017: 1).

These problems are not limited to the casualisation of academic staff. Dickinson (2017: 1) stresses that beyond “the core work of teaching, the basic fabric of the university is starting to rip and tear” as student support programmes are dropped, libraries are understaffed, maintenance is inadequate and sincere attempts at improvements are “swimming against the tide of budgetary contraction” and of relentless cost-cutting, with important consequences.

An important voice in this context is that of Jonathan Jansen, former vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State, who argues that this current crisis represents “the end of our universities as we know them” (Waterworth, 2018: 1). Jansen states, “I have looked at forces which have brought down universities in Africa, including Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania”, including “chronic underfunding by the state, chronic instability on campuses and attacking the autonomy of universities... When these conditions prevail, it doesn’t take long for universities to collapse” (quoted in Waterworth, 2018: 1).

The Alienation of Organised Labour

It is argued here that the long-standing historical precarity faced by the majority is contributing to a

rise in populism and nationalism, which is reflected in populist policies that threaten budgetary collapse for universities. Of particular concern is the way a trend toward nationalism and an increase in the influence of predatory private interests in state corporations has alienated organised labour. In the midst of an ongoing budgetary crisis, the increasing precarisation of academic staff stands to be overshadowed by other current crises.

Traditionally, the country's labour movements have been at the vanguard of struggles for social justice, and one would expect a strong response from organised labour to the crisis of precarisation in universities. On account of their struggle against apartheid, the country's trade unions effectively shaped the political landscape. The influence of organised labour in the global context has waned in the wake of the growing informalisation of work, and they have faced criticism that they are "protecting the special interests of those in regular employment" (Webster, 2017: 1). However, in this country the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has, until recently, wielded political power in an alliance with the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC).¹ Whereas the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) extends its membership to university staff such as cleaners (Webster, 2017), academic staff in different universities have typically formed their own unions. Interestingly, in terms of those in precarious work and in response to the crisis facing traditional trade unions worldwide, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) has recently emerged. It seeks to cross the divide "between organised workers and the growing precariat – those in casual, outsourced and informal jobs" – and apply innovative methods of organising to recruit unfamiliar constituencies (Webster, 2017: 1).

Although costs for universities are increasing at a critical time, there is hope that the labour power of academics may strengthen following the recent insourcing of other workers. A key demand of the #FeesMustFall protests was for the insourcing of university workers, including cleaning staff, gardeners, security guards and others, projected to cost between R400 million to R2 billion per a year (Forde, 2016). Insourcing was taken up by universities across the country and, notwithstanding uneven progress to date (Furlong, 2017), it has created a new dynamic on campuses as academic unions have come to stand together with other unions to press their issues. For example, on account of the insourcing process, the Academic Staff Association of Wits University (ASAWU) recently found itself allied to the Admin, Library and Technical Staff Association (AL TSA), NUMSA and the National Health Education and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU). They made an application to the dispute resolution body, the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), to file a wage dispute claim (Nzimande, 2017). Notwithstanding these positive developments, increasing precarity due to forced privatisation on account of the budgetary crisis remains a critical challenge.

Contextual Imperatives

As stressed above, the systematic underfunding of higher education in South Africa is arguably akin to forced privatisation, a process especially pernicious in that it works in subtle ways. Its consequences for casualisation and precarity are overshadowed by discourse around "necessity", "budget imperatives" and "the need to save the academic project". Many have argued that free

¹ The Tripartite Alliance consists of the ruling African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

education (rather than loans) is sorely needed on the grounds of social justice, but others believe that it is unaffordable at present. The recent history of diminishing subsidy investments in education (Universities South Africa, 2016) together with the country's emerging fiscal crisis (Rossouw, 2017) seem to suggest that academic workers might bear the brunt of even more serious budget pressures. Of concern for the sector, this period has seen labour federations and leftist movements lose political power to the ruling party, along with the recent axing of the Minister of Higher Education, who was also the General Secretary of the South African Communist Party (SACP) (Dlamini, 2017). The political side-lining of its Tripartite Alliance partners – COSATU and the SACP – by the ruling party (Lindeque, 2017) may herald diminishing political commitment to worker interests if these clash with populist political imperatives. These contextual changes may have important implications for worker rights and for precarity in academic work. Academics, and indeed workers in the broader context, might be denied recourse to political labour responses due to a devaluation of the political weight of the labour movement following the ruling party's National Elective Conference in December 2017. At this nexus it is important to locate these contextual shifts in the country within broader themes in the international labour context.

To understand why the South African context of increasingly precarious academic work may be atypical of other contexts, including “Northern” contexts, it is necessary to examine the issues in the literature in terms of their relevance to precarious labour. For Guy Standing, liberalisation underlying globalisation has spawned a new “dangerous” class, the “precariat”, described as follows:

It [the precariat] consists of a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development, including millions of frustrated youth who do not like what they see before them, millions of women abused in oppressive labour, growing numbers of criminalised tagged for life, millions being categorised as ‘disabled’ and migrants in their hundreds of millions around the world. They are denizens; they have a more restricted range of social, cultural, political and economic rights than citizens around them (Standing, 2011: 1).

Given the global rise of precarious work, however, “fundamental differences in the histories of work, and of workers, in the Global North and Global South should caution against viewing precarity as a universal phenomenon whose meanings and implications are cognate for workers everywhere” (Scully, 2016: 161). Indeed, ascribing homogeneity to different groups and across contexts may lend itself to analysis that does not take into account important local nuances and characteristics. Unlike in developed contexts, populations with an experience of unabated historical precarity, such as those in South Africa, have typically taken recourse to social movement unionism, or a new politics of Southern labour associated with the rise of the political labour movement (Scully, 2016). This contrasts with Standing's (2011) description of this precariat as a “new” class. What seems to bear consideration, however, is the other aspect of Standing's argument, that such a class is “dangerous”, particularly if such danger includes moves toward rightist populism and away from leftist ideas and a decline in power of labour federations. With regard to these “dangers”, Standing argues:

The biggest dangers are social illnesses and the risk that populist politicians will play on their fears and insecurities to lure them onto the rocks of neo-fascism, blaming ‘big government’ and ‘strangers’ for their plight. We are witnessing this drift, increasingly disguised by clever rebranding, as in the case of

the True Finns, Swedish Democrats and French National Front. They have natural allies in the US Tea Party, the Japanese copycats, the English Defence League and the originals, Berlusconi's neo-fascist supporters (Standing, 2011: 1).

If precarious labour in university contexts is overshadowed by the dissatisfaction of a national precariat who have seen little change after democratisation in 1994, and if this dissatisfaction is channelled by populist politics into nationalism, it is possible that the pressing need for a rise in labour politics needed to address the real problems of precarity will be obscured, as nationalistic agendas seek power at the expense of labour movements. Can this dissatisfaction with economic conditions and unaddressed continual precarity lead to increasing nationalism, and a polarisation between right and left, resulting in the suppression of leftist movements and unions? It is not clear at present what the future trajectory will be, but the consequences of this would bode ill not only for academic precarity, but for precarity in general throughout the country.

It is argued here that South Africa might currently face this threat, and that the consequences of this for labour in the country's higher education sector would be dire. A first indicator of this risk is perhaps the extent to which unemployment and precarity dominate in this context. In terms of comparisons, faced with the Great Depression, Germany in 1932 and 1933 experienced an unemployment rate at its peak of 24 per cent of the labour force (Dimsdale, Horsewood and Van Riel, 2004).

Although currently countries with the highest unemployment rates in the European Union, such as Greece and Spain (Eurostat, 2017), are less plagued by right-wing nationalism and anti-immigration populism than certain countries with lower unemployment rates, such as Austria and Hungary (Erlanger and Kanter, 2017), an increasing unemployment rate might herald political instability in South Africa for different reasons. South Africa's unemployment rate has steadily increased, from 24.3 per cent in January 2015 to 27.7 per cent in 2017; of those unemployed, the youth (aged 15–34) are most vulnerable, with an unemployment rate of 38.7 per cent (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Importantly, unemployment is racially skewed, as the oppressive conditions of apartheid still persist in its legacy of inequality. Many have decried the failure of the current political system to address this legacy. Dissatisfaction with the racially skewed nature of inequality seems to be on the rise in the form of nationalist populist discourse (*Citizen*, 2016; eNCA, 2016; Stolley, 2016). Such impatience with racial inequality is echoed by regular statements by the country's President (Presence, 2017). The rise of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), now the country's third-largest political party, has been on the back of radical populist policies, with a particular focus on racial inequality (Stolley, 2016). Its recent victory in the Student Representative Council elections at a leading university (Mabasa, 2017), and its growing presence in coalition governments of major metropolitan cities, has perhaps led to the ANC's adoption at its recent elective conference of EFF policies such as the expropriation of land without compensation to address inequality in patterns of land ownership.

Polarisation between right and left is of concern, as the ruling tripartite coalition between what has been described by critics as an increasingly corrupt and nationalist ruling party and its strongly leftist alliance partners is under threat (Gumede, 2016; Gallens, 2017; Mashaba, 2017; Nicolaidis, 2017). Both the SACP and COSATU have recently called for the country's president to step down (Manyathela, 2017; Sekhotho, 2017).

Another indicator of this potential is perhaps the country's recent history of xenophobic events. Xenophobic violence has increasingly become a feature of South African society since democratisation (Harris, 2002; Gastrow and Amit, 2012), its incidence typically falling upon those most vulnerable from other African countries, including in the informal sector (Callaghan, 2014). Worryingly, the rise of organised anti-immigrant protests suggests little sign of let-up, notwithstanding protests from other African governments ((Bolligelo, 2017; ISS Today, 2017).

Given these two supporting indicators, Standing's (2011) argument that precarity can have political consequences for labour interests cannot be dismissed. Indeed, if precarity is (unlike in Northern contexts) perceived as historically unending, and this has not changed since the country's democratisation, then recent political events might reflect growing impatience.

Implications for Academic Precarity

Recent political events might have important implications for precarious labour in South African academia. Under mounting pressure from labour federations to step down, on the eve of the ANC's elective conference in December 2017 the President announced free higher education starting in 2018 for poor students below an income threshold, to be phased in over the next five years (Chambers, 2017; Manyathels, 2017; Mulaudzi, 2017; Sekhotho, 2017; Sobuwa, 2017). The pro-poor nature of the decision has been widely welcomed, particularly given the #FeesMustFall student protests of 2015 and 2016 calling for free and decolonised education ((Masweneng, 2017; Mbanjwa, 2017). However, concerns have been raised about its sustainability, the lack of an implementation plan, and the fact that students would be enrolling before the February 2018 budget speech by the Finance Minister (Masweneng, 2017). Given a pattern of declining subsidy income from government, there is a concern that increasing pressure on academic staff budgets may be reflected in increasing rates of precarity in the sector. The consequences of these changes will necessarily depend on the country's ability to finance free education.

As of late 2017, South Africa's debt-to-GDP ratio was at 50.7 per cent of GDP, up from 27.8 per cent in 2008; some predict this will rise to 65 per cent in the medium term, particularly in light of a predicted revenue shortfall for 2018 (Rossouw, 2017). It is telling that such concerns were raised prior to the announcement of free education. Given these commentaries, it is difficult to conceive of any outcome other than that precarious labour and casualisation will proliferate dramatically, as budgetary constraints are intensified and managers resort to private-sector casualisation and cost-cutting logics. Despite the benefits of free education to poor students, which should be welcomed, the short- and long-term impact of this decision on labour in the sector is as yet unclear, particularly if prior to this decision the financial recovery of the sector was uncertain. According to Universities South Africa:

The #FeesMustFall campaign, commendable as it might have been for the gains it brought about for the student community in 2015/2016, dealt a severe blow to what was already an ailing university sector. Notwithstanding that the DHET [Department of Higher Education and Training] contributed up to 80% of the universities' revenue shortfall arising from the fee-increase freeze for 2016, the moratorium created a series of challenges that cast serious doubt on whether the sector will ever recover (Universities South Africa, 2016: 5).

Disruptive innovations, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs), in a global context of changing higher education funding models can pose a further threat to traditional modes of higher education teaching and practice (Yuan and Powell, 2013; Whitaker, New and Ireland, 2016). A relentless search for “efficiency” and corporatist cost-centric logics are, however, seemingly also at odds with the goal of innovativeness, as a focus on these logics increases the risk of closing the “white space” upon which creativity relies (Cardiani, 2015; Leydesdorff and Ivanova, 2016). The citizenship values of academics (Coldwell et al., 2016) are not typically aligned with corporatist logics associated with maximising output from dwindling resources. It is concluded that those exposed to casualisation and precarity in South African academic work might currently face a “perfect storm” of budgetary pressures across the sector combined with the diminishing power of labour federations under increasing political populism. Given the discussions above, urgently needed in this context is not political disempowerment of the labour movement, but a reinvigoration of the Tripartite Alliance, and a recognition that the values of labour movements may act as a bulwark to nationalist encroachment, and to conditions of “forced privatisation” of the academic working space.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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