

Address by Zwelinzima Vavi to the Equal education protest march, King Williams Town, 29 May 2015

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this important protest march which must confront one of the biggest challenges we face as a nation – how can we implement the promise in our Freedom Charter that “The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!”

I must once again congratulate Equal Education for the excellent work you continue to do to highlight the crisis in our education system. Progressive civil society organisations have a crucial role to play if we are to free our people from the desperate crisis of unemployment, poverty and inequality and the related crisis in our public educational system.

The unemployment statistics released this week by Statistics SA reveal a horror story, but are particularly significant for teachers and learners, who face a more and more daunting prospect of trying to use the skills they are learning at school, when they leave and join the labour market.

The official rate of joblessness in the first quarter of 2015 has now reached 26.4%, up from 24.3% in the previous quarter and the highest since 2003, but the more realistic expanded rate which includes those who have given up looking for work now stands at 36.1%. This means that 8.7 million South Africans who were able to work were unable to do so.

The Freedom Charter gives us a good check-list of tasks against which to assess our progress, or lack of it, in meeting its goals on education when it demands that “The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!” and more specifically that:

- 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;

How can any of these demands be achieved when even those with a relatively good school education, even university graduates, will be struggling to enter the labour market. That makes it even more deplorable that so many learners are at a disadvantage long before they leave school because they are learning under such appalling conditions.

Still worse is the issue we are highlighting today – that 18 months since the Norms & Standards for School Infrastructure became law there are still no plans available to the public showing how those hundreds of schools which do not meet the norms and standards are to be brought up to the legally compulsory level.

Today, 29 May 2015, marks the halfway point in the first 3-year time-frame for the implementation of these regulations. By 29 November 2016 there must be no schools without water, electricity or sanitation and all schools must be built from appropriate structures. This means mud schools, schools made of asbestos, wood and metal must be eradicated.

This was supposed to be a legally-binding agreement which Equal Education and teachers' unions struggled for to reverse the apartheid legacy of inferior educational facilities in black communities.

The law required these plans to be submitted to the Minister of Basic Education by 29 November 2014 – six months ago. So I share your deep concerns that the Department of Basic Education (DBE), despite numerous requests and protests, has still not released them.

They must identify the backlogs in school infrastructure in each province and specify how they will eradicate these backlogs within the time-frames laid down.

When you held sleep-in protests in March the DBE attacked you, saying you “want the plans to be rushed” and were “attention-seekers”. But consider their constant shifting of the goalposts:

- In November 2014, more than 4 months ago, the DBE said that “the Minister will consider the plans before making them public.”
- In late December 2014, in the *Daily Dispatch*, the DBE said “the Minister will meet with the MEC in January or February to go through the plan before making it public.”

- In early March 2015 the DBE said the “Minister is meeting MECs in the next 10 days.”
- In May 2015, in response to EE’s pressure and protests, the DBE said the plans would be released “in a few weeks”.

What will they say now?

It is shocking that EE has found learners learning in small shacks that are hot in summer, leaking during the rainy season and unbearably cold in winter, while in more than 80 schools in King Williams Town and Butterworth, parents and educators in these schools did not know about the norms and standards, because too little has been done to ensure that schools are aware of their rights to better infrastructure.

Given this context, it is easier to understand why half of all learners are dropping out between grade 10 and grade 12. In just those three final years 50% of all learners leave school without completing Matric. In 2012 there were 1,1m learners in grade 10. Only 550,127 of these wrote their Matric exams in 2014.

Why is this happening?

- Firstly, many young people have lost faith in education when they see so many unemployed matriculants and graduates.
- Secondly, schools are dangerous, poorly-resourced places, and transport is expensive.
- Thirdly, poor foundations in reading result in many young people finding school upsetting; it makes them feel stupid instead of building their confidence and knowledge.
- Lastly, many schools force students out in order to improve their matric results. This is due to pressure to produce a higher matric pass rate nationally, whatever the cost.

At the same time there is a worrying trend of black children in townships and rural areas being pushed into subjects that deny them opportunities. Instead of doing

science, mathematics and history, most of our children are taking subjects like consumer studies, tourism and maths literacy. This is a new class-based Bantu Education, where the children of the poor are prepared for lives of labour, if they are lucky! We need a revolution in our education system to undo these trends and build equal education for all."

All these problems are part of a wider scandal in our society which is getting worse – the two-tier system of service delivery. In education, healthcare and public transport, we have a privileged, mainly white elite, who can buy high quality service as good as anywhere in the world.

Meanwhile the poor, overwhelmingly black, majority have to endure the kind of service we have just been talking about in our schools, but it just as bad in most of our public hospitals and clinics.

The crisis in our public education, the astronomical level of unemployment, poverty and inequality demand that government treat this as a national emergency.

Yet on the very day that the shocking unemployment statistics were released, President Zuma was telling Parliament that "Our country is doing very well. The fundamentals are in place. Our institutions are strong and sound. All the arms of the state are functioning effectively: the executive, Parliament and the judiciary. This means our hard-won democracy is safe."

This is outrageous denialism. South Africa is teetering on a knife-edge. Yes, apartheid introduced a culture of violence but that cannot explain why it is getting worse after 21 years of democracy. The reality is that violence is a product of millions of people feeling marginalised and excluded by a society in which the rich get richer and the poor are left even further behind, angry and frustrated.

More than ever we need to take seriously the many promises of the ANC and government to prioritise the transformation of our economy with job creation as top priority. Instead government has allowed that neoliberal economists in the Treasury and the Reserve Bank, and increasingly throughout government as a whole, together with international financial institutions and credit rating agencies to dictate policies which prioritise the maximization of profits and the further enrichment of a predatory capitalist elite.

