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Remarks to the 2010 NUMSA/Wits graduates

Monday 6 December 2010

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Retrieved on 8th September 2021 from lucienvanderwalt.com

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Universities research– that is a good thing, a very good thing indeed. Universities produce abstract knowledge – that is a good thing, a very good thing indeed. Universities educate people – – that is a good thing, a very good thing indeed.

Science is a *glorious* thing, the heritage of *all* humankind. Why should it be in the hands of a few?

We need a comprehensive education, available to all on the basis of inclination, interest and social needs – *not income, not greed*. A comprehensive education available to all people.

This programme is one small step – a tiny step but every journey involves many steps – in the right direction.

To open up that vast repository of information to the working class movement – that is a vital task. In opening the university, we help the working class movement. In strengthening the working class movement, we can continue to change the university, and through all of this, we can continue to change society for the better, to escape from the “*hereditary inequality of occupations, of wealth, of education, and of rights*” of which Bakunin speaks.

The broad working class is a class preparing for power. And knowledge is power.

I thank you.

Thank you. I will say a few words, if I may. In the first place, let me say a few ‘thank you’s:

- To the comrades who attended the course studied hard and achieved; if you learnt from me, I learnt from you as well
- To the union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) which made the course possible, and which has made a commitment to the course continuing; such co-operation, between academics and the working class movement is an essential part of a progressive transformation in society
- To the university, which has opened its doors to this new type of student; this, I think, is a critical part of the university fulfilling its commitment to engagement with the broader society

Why education like this matters

In mounting this course, we – that is, my colleagues, Michelle, Devan, Vishwas, Louise – did not aim to provide just another accreditation, just another certificate. There are many others who do that. Certainly, it was not to replace the unions’ own education programmes.

We aimed to develop a course that stressed critical thinking and that empowered students through intellectual skills.

Let me quite clear on what I mean by this. By *critical thinking*, I do not mean teaching people to criticize everything, teaching people to be negative, teaching people to become *cynical*. There are enough people who just complain, who use their bleak view of the world as an excuse to do nothing, people who glory in negativity.

By critical thinking, I mean a way of thinking

- that examines issues carefully,
- that is accurate and precise, and not led astray by empty words and slogans,
- that weighs evidence, considers explanations and draws careful conclusions
- that enables clear goal setting, through clearly identifying the problem in order to find the solutions
- that draws on a knowledge of debates in the social sciences

This was supplemented by skills development: skills in analysis, in substantive writing and in close reading.

Our aim, in short, was not simply to teach a bunch of facts. Comrades know many things, and comrades can teach us many things too. Facts matter – but facts need to be understood *correctly*, their *significance* judged, their *sources* assessed, their *political* implications considered.

Our aim was to provide the tools to *judge facts*, to *find facts*, to *wield facts*. It was to teach comrades to think more scientifically. It was not to tell people what to think, but to show comrades what many people have thought, what many people do think – and to show comrades how to think through these issues.

Why education like this matters to the working class movement in particular

Let me answer this question from my own perspective.

The NUMSA programme at Wits does not push any particular view, it has no ‘party line’ besides a commitment to an open, critical education, and to opening the university to the working class movement. It has no party line, but instead it exposes comrades to a range of views – and arms them with the knowledge needed to make up their own minds.

So what is my view?

We live in an unjust society, a society in which, as the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin said, power is in the hands of a few “so long as human society continues to be divided into different classes as a result of the hereditary inequality of occupations, of wealth, of education, and of rights.” So long as this persists, “there will always be a class-restricted government and the inevitable exploitation of the majorities by the minorities.” [1867, “Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism”]

Knowledge is power – the task, then, is to start to transfer that power into the hands of the “majority” of which Bakunin speaks.

Ideas change the world – we need more access to ideas.

The university is one of the most – perhaps the most – effective instruments that humankind has yet developed to develop new knowledge and to impart new knowledge – and here, again, I stress, when I am talking about knowledge, I am talking about knowledge not simply as an accumulation of facts – important as that is – but also, knowledge as the skills needed to wield facts as a weapon.

A key task, then, is to break the class stranglehold over knowledge that disarms the masses of the people. Programmes that provide access to university education – real university education, I mean, not simply a rollout of short courses to increase numbers and revenue – can make an important contribution to that process.