

## Global Issues

### **#OutsourcingMustFall: The Role of Workers in the 2015 Protest Wave at South African Universities**

*Thembi Luckett and Deliwé Mzobe*

On 14 October 2015, students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, South Africa, launched a protest against the annual increase in student fees at the university. In the subsequent days and weeks, the protest spread to universities across the country, and came to be known as the #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement, which built on student movements earlier in the year, most notably the #RhodesMustFall movement. This was the biggest university protest wave in South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994 and, some say, the most significant student protest since the 1976 Soweto riots. While the protests began with a focus on the student fee increase for 2016, demands were soon expanded to include issues such as free education, the cancellation of student debt, the decolonisation of the curriculum, and the insourcing of all university workers.

While the protests have been widely analysed as a student movement, low-paid and outsourced university workers have also been key actors. At the University of the Witwatersrand, outsourced workers joined protesting students from the first day. By the end of 2015, students and workers in at least eighteen tertiary institutions in different parts of South Africa had participated in protest action. They put their bodies on the line occupying university spaces and marching to the Johannesburg party headquarters of the ruling African National Congress, to the national Parliament in Cape Town, and to the Union Buildings in Pretoria which house the executive branch of the national government.

In a dramatically short space of time major victories were achieved. The ANC government agreed to no fee increase for 2016, and one by one university managements started to agree, in principle, to insource workers, meaning that all outsourced support staff would be directly employed by the university. This commitment was made by the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the University of Free State (UFS) among others. Protests and strikes are continuing in 2016 for insourcing at other universities. This is arguably the biggest victory against the privatisation of the public sector in South Africa since 1994.

The struggle against outsourcing at universities started over fifteen years ago. In 1999, the University of Cape Town engaged in extensive retrenchments and outsourcing of all “support services”, such as cleaning, catering, maintenance and so on. UCT was the pioneer of outsourcing in South African Higher Education institutions. Wits University and others were soon to follow. This was part of a global trend in the context of neo-liberalism. Cuts in public spending for tertiary institutions encouraged public–private partnerships and third-stream income, as well as a focus on productivity and competitiveness in both the public and private sectors, promoting the model of the “market university” (Adams, 2006; Bardill, 2008).

With outsourcing, a significant portion of workers went from being university employees to being outsiders providing a service. This reinforced apartheid-like social and economic divisions, as the “skilled” administrators and academics who remained “core” university employees were mostly white and middle class, while the “unskilled” service workers, who were working class and almost all black, were redefined as “non-core”, despite the importance of the services they provided to the functioning of the university. In addition to such social division, outsourcing also had a negative material impact on workers. For example, when benefits are added to base wages, UCT cleaning workers earned between R11 and R14 per hour before outsourcing, compared to R6 per hour after outsourcing. The boundaries of inclusion and exclusion drawn by this neo-liberal ideology are not as crude as they were under apartheid, but they serve a similar purpose – that of reproducing class and race inequalities. This resulted in the destruction of the university as a collective community and the erosion of a public sector based on the needs of the majority of people.

The process of outsourcing at South African universities was resisted by trade unions, workers and concerned members of the university community, albeit unevenly. However, nowhere was outsourcing prevented, and unions organising support staff were effectively smashed in the process. Since outsourcing was undertaken at most South African universities in the late 1990s and early 2000s, workers across universities now fall under different sectors, such as cleaning and security. Because of this, they have been in and out of different sectoral unions, and have faced difficulties in organising collectively (Grossman, 2009). In response to this fragmentation, there were efforts among workers, along with progressive students and staff, to build alternative organisations and structures to unite workers and to build solidarity for workers within the university community. These include the UCT Workers Forum, the Wits Workers Solidarity Committee and the UJ Persistent Solidarity Forum. Workers have waged many struggles over the years over issues such as dismissals, victimisation, racism and wages. Attempts were always made to connect immediate demands with the long-term demand of reversing outsourcing, with outsourced workers themselves taking the lead in these struggles (Grossman, 2009). While some gains were made on issues such as wages, freedom to organise and associate, and job security, few substantive gains on the issue of outsourcing at universities were won despite fifteen years of activism and organising – that is, until the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015.

The following is an interview with Deliwe Mzobe, a shop steward and leading worker activist at Wits, conducted by Thembi Luckett, a PhD candidate and student activist at the same university. Both Deliwe and Thembi are active in the Wits Workers Solidarity Committee. The interview examines how the victory of insourcing was won after fifteen years, the power of unity between workers and students, and a vision of what a university could and should look like.

*What is your experience of being an outsourced worker at Wits?*

I have been a cleaner at Wits since 2008. I was first a temporary worker and then a permanent worker at an outsourced company since 2012. It was very hard. We felt like outsiders because we could not access simple things like the different entrances at Wits. We were only allowed to access Wits through one entrance. We were only allowed to use certain toilets even though we cleaned all of them. We were not allowed to be seen – to sit in the shade, on the lawns and benches. We did not have access to computer and library facilities. We did not have access to Wits buses even if we needed to move from one side of campus to another. Some of it is still like this, but it is better.

Most of all, the money was not good. It was literally nothing. You cannot survive on the wages

we receive. I was not able to support my family. I had to choose between lunch and transport money for my daughter. As a result, one resorts to loans from the banks. Sometimes you find people who owe money to almost all the banks. And if you cannot pay, you are blacklisted and have to go to the loan sharks. The loan sharks keep your ID document and your bank card and as soon as money comes in they take a lot of it. Some add 30 per cent, 40 per cent, and even 50 per cent. It just becomes a vicious cycle that you are trapped in.

*Why did workers come out in support of the student protests against tuition fee increases from 14 October 2015?*

The workers look up to the students. They will do anything for the students. We had recently had the October 6 protest against outsourcing,<sup>1</sup> which was a success due to the students. The students supported us. It was a way of giving back. They give us support, we give them support. In the beginning the students did not include End Outsourcing in their demands, it was just a zero per cent fee increase, so we were giving back. The workers support the students because of the care and the love we get from the students. In some instances the students risked their degrees for us, for example the MJL case where students occupied the Vice Chancellor's office.<sup>2</sup> They put their degrees on the line fighting for the workers. The students do anything and they worry about the consequences later.

*How did the demands change to include End Outsourcing?*

I think the students realised that it was not only about the tuition fee increase. Students realised that workers were there all the time with them and that there should be a gain for workers, too. They said, "We can't allow this exploitation of our parents to go on. This outsourcing must end". It also became a struggle for free education. If you are an outsourced parent, how can you afford to send your children to university, even if there is no fee increase? It is impossible. So it becomes a cycle of poverty.

*How do you feel about the FMF protests and the insourcing victory?*

I don't even have the words to express myself. All the workers still say how grateful they are to our students. I feel so much joy when I think about what the students did for us and I will do anything to support the students in return.

We were also lucky we did not experience the abuse and brutality from security that other workers did, like at UJ. The students at Wits protected us. They would say, "Our parents, you can come to work as normal and then we will come and get you [to join the protest]". So it would be the students' fault, not ours, when we did not work.

*The struggle against outsourcing started fifteen years ago. What do you think was different about these protests? Why did we get a victory this time?*

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<sup>1</sup> This was a one-day protest against outsourcing organised by a group of students, workers and academics at Wits and UJ, and supported by other universities including UCT, UFS and Stellenbosch University.

<sup>2</sup> MJL was an electrical subcontractor hired by Wits. MJL workers were not paid for months and the company violated core labour laws, failing to pay mandatory national unemployment insurance and tax contributions. Workers eventually lost their jobs without notice or any form of compensation. Students and workers occupied the Vice Chancellor's office in 2015 in protest against the abuse of MJL workers.

It was because of the combined power of the students and workers. When the students united they opened the doors that were long shut. They forced ears that were deaf to listen to us. Previously they heard us but ignored us. The Wits Workers Solidarity Committee has been saying End Outsourcing for years. The October 6 Movement<sup>3</sup> said this also. The October 6 Movement was different universities coming together. It was a starting point to ending outsourcing. Wits and UJ started the October 6 Movement but other universities participated so it was easier for a national campaign against outsourcing to develop in the student protests. When the mass of students put their stamp on top of it, it became a victory.

*We heard for years from management that insourcing is not possible, but then it changed. What lessons can we learn from this for existing and future workers' struggles?*

That everything is possible. Insourcing has been possible all along. It was just that management used it as a disguise, that there are no finances. But they waste money all the time on big salaries, parties and security. This is the money that can be used for the working class.

We learned that we have to join forces. When we are united we are strong. And we also have to have lots of meetings so we can have proper discussions about our struggles and how to come together to find common goals and solutions. We also took action. Shutting down the university made management listen in the first place.

My advice would be to be united and don't back down until you've won insourcing and all your demands. Don't go back to work even if they try to intimidate you; at the end it's impossible to fire all the workers. There mustn't be those ones who try to sneak back to work because they are scared of losing their jobs.

*What was the role of trade unions in the struggle and what should their role be?*

Trade unions have not been effective. They take our money every month but they do limited work. They are only concerned with CCMA<sup>4</sup> work. Unions had little to do with the victory at Wits. In some places they were an obstacle to the victory, like at UJ where they are close with management. The unions worry too much about the law. If you go on strike they want to stop you because you are not protected by the law but the students act now; they don't care what the law says. So I think that's how we can be successful in our struggles. The unions are too close to the government now. They are eating the money. We don't trust the current existing unions. We need a union that is powerful. Maybe it can be a union together with students. We need to look at all options when we are insourced.

*What is the way forward for insourcing at Wits now?*

We are waiting for the insourcing process but we can't relax until it actually happens. It is also

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<sup>3</sup> October 6 represents the coming together of campus-specific struggles into a national campaign for insourcing on campuses, as part of a long-term campaign for a decolonised public African university. It is an effort to unite workers, students and academics on all campuses to create principled and progressive universities as well as change in the society in which they work.

<sup>4</sup>The Council for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) is an independent body established by South African law to mediate labour law disputes. For many vulnerable workers in South Africa, particularly in industries with no collective bargaining, it is the primary site of dispute resolution.

very important to get a mandate. We can't just make our own decisions and assume that is what workers want. For example, we had to get a mandate to accept the R4 500 minimum wage offer.<sup>5</sup>

*What is the way forward for the struggle for free education?*

It is hard. As much as free education is necessary, the university needs funds. It has to come from government. The students need to put pressure on government. They need to strategise and unite at all the universities to say we are shutting down and then the government will listen. The students have exposed the ANC as a weak government who benefit themselves and I think that they are now in trouble. It is threatening the ANC rule.

*What do you think a university should look like? What is your dream university?*

It is a place where we are free. Where all the workers and the students are free. I like what is happening now with all the struggles that have brought us together. It is not like before, when we just used to walk past each other. Now wherever I go, the students say "Mam Deliwe, our parent, how are you?" They are greeting us. It is whereby we know each other as the university community. We communicate. We get together, not only when we are protesting. We should be able to get together in a friendly and free way. So I think now we are on the way. We are not fully there yet because there are still those students and staff that are ignorant. We also want to be able to get an education, not just be staff or workers. We want to be able to do all things. We also need to be able to afford our expenses. We need a decent life with a living wage of about R20 000. The struggle is far from over but at least there is progress.

Treating human beings like human beings is too much for a university running like a business. Then the answer is clear – we must stop it running like a business. We must make it a place where people can work and learn and teach as human beings. Maybe this looks like a dream. It is true. It is a dream. But it is a dream we must turn into the truth of our lives (UCTW Forum and UCTW Support Committee, 2010).

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<sup>5</sup> One of the initial agreements of the task team set up to implement insourcing at Wits is the establishment of a R4 500 (about \$275) monthly minimum wage for workers at the university.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

THEMBI LUCKETT is a PhD candidate in the Wits Sociology Department, exploring hope and utopianism in everyday working-class lives. After completing an MA at Sussex University, she worked for two trade unions, in the clothing and textile and agricultural sectors respectively. She has also worked on research projects including the history and traditions of popular education in South Africa (University of the Western Cape) and the effects of mega-events on the working poor (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing). She has been active in the struggles of outsourced university workers since 2009 at UCT, Sussex and Wits. [Email: [thembil@gmail.com](mailto:thembil@gmail.com)]

DELIWE MZOBE lives in Pimville, Soweto. She completed her matric at Musi High School and started working soon after because her parents could not afford tertiary education. She worked as a cleaner at Namibian Breweries and was promoted to receptionist and creditors clerk. She completed a number of courses on the job. In 2004 she was retrenched and started a clothing business, which was unsuccessful. Subsequently she worked as a casual for a telephone research company until 2008 when she became a cleaner at Wits, with the hope that one day she would be able to further her education. Deliwe has been a worker leader in the Wits Workers Solidarity Committee since 2011 and was elected as a shop steward in 2013. In 2015 she was involved in the formation of the October 6 Movement and is currently part of the Wits Insourcing Task Team.