

UJ workers'/students' alliance

A tainted history

While taking part in the University of Johannesburg (UJ) workers' and students' protests to end outsourcing of services at the institution, **Itumeleng Moabi** witnesses a carrot-and-stick method as one of the workers inexplicably signs an agreement binding all workers while the peaceful march is teargassed. A lecturer even spies on protestors, allegedly misrepresenting the events to the university authorities.

In November the UJ workers' and students' movement started protests to end the outsourcing of services at the university. 9 November is recorded in history as the first victory for students and workers in their fight against outsourcing. On this day 141 students and workers as well as academics from UJ, University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) attended their bail hearing at the Johannesburg Central Magistrates' Court.

The group was arrested on 6 November 2015 outside the UJ Kingsway Campus' main entrance on charges of breaching a court interdict requested by UJ earlier to declare the workers' strike illegal and unprotected. Declaring the strike illegal meant that workers went against their contractual agreement with UJ by downing tools and refraining from providing cleaning services to the institution.

Students and academic staff supported the plight of outsourced workers through solidarity and participation in a strike already declared illegal by the institution. By so doing they also contravened the court interdict, which stated that protesters should keep a 700m

distance from UJ. After spending more than 24 hours in the Brixton Police Station cells, the group of 141 was released on free bail on 7 November 2015 on condition they not to attend any mass meetings or gatherings until their bail hearing in court on 9 November 2015.

On the court day, the 141 accused arrived for an appearance at the Johannesburg Central Magistrate Court in the Johannesburg CBD. However, before the court proceedings began, reports of a signed agreement between UJ and the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) on ending outsourcing at UJ were heard. It was later established that one of the 141 accused was also a signatory to this agreement between UJ and Nehawu which was made a day after the release from Brixton Police Station.

The collective was puzzled as to how the worker signed when she was supposed to be restricted by her bail conditions. The 141 were instructed by their lawyers not to attend or take part in meetings until the bail hearing on 9 November. More puzzling was how one worker became a 'representative of outsourced workers' in the Joint UJ and Labour

Memorandum of Agreement on the Insourcing of Outsourced Services and the Transfer of Workers to UJ. She is the only worker from the group to have signed this agreement amidst three Nehawu signatures and that of the vice chancellor. What also alarmed the strikers is that this meeting took place at a country club in Woodmead, not at UJ. According to students, this venue is well-known for bribes.

When the said worker arrived outside the Magistrates' Court and was confronted by the collective about news of her signature on the agreement, she appeared shocked by the contents. It quickly became apparent that she had not seen or read the agreement before signing it. Based on the notes she made, discussion at the meeting in Woodmead also included new salary estimates based on available budgets. From her report to the collective, it was apparent that she was manipulated and coerced into signing the agreement.

However, the collective resolved that she needed to give a press statement in an effort to distance herself from what workers considered to be a fraudulent agreement that compromised her



In solidarity with the arrested: Workers and students demonstrate outside Brixton police station in Johannesburg.

bail conditions. It was evident that she needed to clear her name to avoid being regarded a 'sell-out' by the movement. She had to make it clear to strikers that she was not elected or mandated by the movement to represent outsourced workers. The strikers saw the agreement as unconstitutional and undemocratic in terms of how it was concluded.

At no point was she coerced or threatened into giving a press statement. Her will to deliver the press statement was based on her newfound understanding of the implications of signing an agreement on behalf of hundreds of workers without consulting any of them. She further understood the consequences of signing a vague agreement that did not specifically acknowledge the workers' memorandum and nor represent it. The strikers were disturbed by the implication of one of their own in this agreement.

WALK TO CAMPUS

The protesters agreed to walk to UJ's Kingsway Campus from the court. After spending all day outside the courts waiting to hear the fate of the 141, it was announced that the charges have been dropped

and that they were free to leave. Following the news, the movement decided to proceed to Auckland Park Kingsway (APK) to set up camp until the vice chancellor, Ihron Rensburg, met with them. Central to the demands of the movement was a transparent one-on-one meeting with Rensburg. During negotiations for the release of the 141, Rensburg kept making a concerted effort to destabilise the unity and transparency within the movement by calling certain individuals to private meetings. The worker who signed could have been a victim of these underhand tactics.

With the charges dropped, strikers claimed this announcement as a momentous victory for their cause and became more determined to fight against outsourcing.

The walk represented a forward movement towards getting answers from Rensburg. The group was made up of representatives of workers and students seeking justice from UJ. For instance, an older worker - probably in his 60s or 70s - assumed the responsibility of redirecting traffic from the route taken by the march. Generally, pedestrians and drivers accommodated the march, which

was seamless, with little irritation. It was a slow-paced walk with the frontline chained together to limit anyone from stepping out of line. The songs were also peaceful, incorporating greeting messages to fellow workers in shops as well as at the Wits construction site.

As the march moved through Braamfontein, metro police officers appeared and escorted the demonstration. The 'walk' then came to a halt when a bus carrying UJ students was spotted. Protesters blocked the bus and demanded that the students aboard join the protest. Metro police officers were present during this entire altercation and at no point did they witness any cause for intervention. Eventually, the bus driver allowed students to get off but insisted that he will follow 'the walk' to APK to collect the students again. The bus drove behind 'the walk' whilst the metro police vehicles were at the front.

After a main intersection, black police vehicles arrived and again 'the walk' came to a stop. Out came the same senior police officer who had led the team that arrested the 141. Shortly after, protesters were scattered all over Kingsway Road when the South African Police Services (SAPS) members fired



Homebound: Workers and students leave Brixton police station after their release.

several tear-gas canisters on the unarmed and non-confrontational strikers who were moving to the Bunting Road Campus. It was at this same intersection that protesters were approached by a man they recognised as a UJ lecturer. He approached me and other comrades as we were fleeing the tear-gas smoke. During my conversation with the lecturer he seemed sympathetic to students and workers and was against the tear-gassing by the SAPS. The lecturer said he had been away and wanted some perspective on what was happening from the protesters' viewpoint and why police were firing tear-gas and assaulting us.

He was also interested in finding out why we specifically wanted to speak to Rensburg. During this conversation, the lecturer was on his phone constantly updating the person(s) on the other end of the line of the exact location of the 'walk' and what was happening with the police. I told him that we wanted a transparent and open meeting with the vice chancellor.

On the same day the lecturer told Rensburg and 20 concerned academics that he was 'shocked and ashamed to say UJ students smashed windows of a bus with passengers inside'. This story was

not only false and misleading but defamed the protesters. It is alarming when management uses such infiltration tactics to discredit workers and students.

Another important clarification that should be made is that the bus burnt on 9 November 2015 is not linked to the march as all protesters were gathered outside the Johannesburg Central Magistrates' Court. The movement condemns any acts of violence committed in their name and denounces false statements about any member of this movement acting violently in any form or shape. If anything, there are students and workers who sustained injuries at the hand of the bouncers employed by UJ and the SAPS. The message against violence was delivered to the media before the walk commenced and also to the alleged lecturer during the walk. Also condemned were remarks made by anyone trying to incite the movement into acting violently. Protesters condemn reports of violence by students and workers as vile tactics to sidetrack them from the main issues of transformation and outsourcing in higher education institutions. Beyond this, these tactics are used to justify UJ's bullying stunts and dismissive attitude.

On arrival at the UJ Kingsway gate, strikers were met with numerous SAPS and Johannesburg Municipality Police Department (JMPD) vehicles, including big 'gumba gumbas' (armoured police vehicles) like the ones used during the arrests on 6 November. On the opposite end of the gate, the hired UJ bouncers were gathered in what seemed like a briefing session before they were set loose to attack workers and students. Meanwhile, protesters sat along the sides of the drop-off zone on a mission to spend the night outside the UJ gates until Rensburg came out to engage them. The continuation of the mission to occupy UJ showed a commitment on the side of the workers and students alliance to see their demands through. The general consensus governing this commitment was that workers had nothing more to lose since dismissals had started the previous week. The determination was relentless with both students and workers understanding what was at stake – the future of transformation. ¹⁶

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