

Fees must fall but wages must rise

Workers speak on student solidarity

With solidarity from the student Fees Must Fall movement in 2015 and 2016, outsourced general workers at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) won a longstanding demand to be insourced. **Kally Forrest** interviewed workers about the protests and what they won.



General workers marching and celebrating at the University of the Witwatersrand after electing their first union representative to the university council. K Forrest

What was your work situation before the student protests?

Security worker, Cannesious Nete: I was an outsourced worker working for Fidelity Security posted at Wits.

Cleaner, Edward Modisenyane: As an Impact cleaner at Wits I was earning R1,500 a month. The majority of cleaners at Impact are women and they always complained about sex for jobs – sex with supervisors or managers. We were harassed there. You could be moved from Wits to another place overnight. They could move you anywhere to work, especially if they didn't like you. If you complained and were strong you got fired.

How did you form an alliance with students in 2015?

EM: Before the student protests, on 6 October, Impact cleaners presented a memorandum of demands to Wits management to raise our salaries to R12,500 a month, like the Marikana demands. We also demanded an end to sexual harassment and that we wanted to be insourced.

Then the student protests started and we fought together. Students made good demands that I understood. They were paying high fees and they couldn't afford this. I wanted to go to school but I could never afford it.

The students fetched us workers. And I was there with students marching and protesting. At first I didn't understand their demands then we met with students and they explained why they were demanding free education and that Wits cleaners, security and gardeners must be insourced. They explained about power.

CN: We liked the student demand for free education. We as parents understood. As parents being outsourced you don't earn enough. We agreed we would support the students and they us. There was a mutual understanding.

How did the protest unfold?

CN: Students closed the gates. They stopped everyone. Nobody could get in and nobody could go home. We told them we support you but as security we must look after buildings, the residences. So we didn't all down tools as we knew there would be theft from the students in residences and the university. So security monitored those who may steal but we wouldn't let anyone in at the entrances.

This went on for a week and then there were negotiations. The police only monitored, they didn't intervene. Students intensified the struggle to shut down all offices. There was consultation. One night Habib [Adam Habib, Vice Chancellor] was held and questioned by students all night in Senate House. Later the police forced their way in.

The cleaners did not join the protests. They were threatened that if they joined the company would take disciplinary action against them. In November the university complained to Fidelity saying we are your client how can you allow the security to join the student struggle. Two security leaders had their contracts ended.

Some students said Fidelity cannot dictate what happens - no security must be posted at residences. I stood up and told them if we don't guard residences thugs will come in. Some residences were burnt and also two offices here at the Language School.

Then there was a decision to fight in a different way and to begin talking in an Insourcing Task Team - the ITT - chaired by lawyer Dali Mpfu. Negotiations started and we still had a strong relationship with students.

Did student-worker solidarity develop in other ways?

CN: Security, cleaners and gardeners popped out some money for students who were owing NSFAS [National Student Financial Aid Scheme]. They raised nearly R102,000. I chair that money [shows book of accounts]. We even paid for some students to go overseas. We paid bail for students arrested in the protests in 2016. The balance is now R60,605.

After the president announced a no fee increase there were students who continued to support us and sat on the ITT.

EM: During the protests we sometimes stayed late discussing with students and then we had to go far to return home. I live in Vereeniging [60kms from Johannesburg] so students would give us money to get back home.

What did you win in negotiations?

EM: There was an agreement to insource and that we become Wits employees. I was earning R1,500 with Impact Cleaning and Wits first topped it up to R2,700. Then in June (2016) to R4,500 and now in July (2017) to R6,600. We also won overalls, T-shirts, and safety boots.

We are still working out our medical aid as the current Wits one with a R3,000 contribution is too expensive for cleaners

Unless there is a formal agreement to transfer us we will no longer be moved around.

We negotiate through our unions now. Nehawu [National Education Health & Allied Workers Union] member is useless. It only started marketing to us at Wits once we were insourced. I now belong to a new union, Numsa [National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa]

CN: Fidelity negotiated with Mpfu and the university and then came back to the 240 security workers.

The EFF [Economic Freedom Front] tried to hi-jack and take credit for negotiations especially as Mpfu is an EFF leader, but he was sent

by students to chair the ITT so we accepted it.

We agreed that when contracts ended, workers would be insourced to Wits and get an increase. The cleaners from Impact and Ukweza were the first to be insourced in January 2017.

Security was insourced from Fidelity in July 2017 and we achieved three top-ups. We first got an extra R3,000-R4,000, then a further R3,000-4,500 which brought us to R7,800 and the final increase took us to R10,000 per month. Our hours of work were reduced from 12 hours to 8 per day.

We got good benefits. Four months paternity leave, a medical aid of our choice into which we pay R800, and the Fidelity provident fund was converted into the better Wits pension fund. But some cleaners cashed in their provident funds to pay debts.

The university issued us with new uniforms and nice long coats and warm jackets as we often work outside. General worker unions and students also won representation on the University Council for the first time and we are currently electing representatives.

What do you still need to negotiate?

CN: The only mistake about which workers feel pain, is that 75 Ukwezi cleaners were not insourced. We drew up a list which excluded them as they were still in training and they were brought in after the 2015 struggle. So there are still outsourced cleaners working alongside permanents. How can Wits management justify this? So the struggle is on-going.

I learnt from this and made sure all 240 security was insourced.

Fees Must Fall changed everything. We still meet with students. After the struggle we were so happy we formed a soccer team and compete against each other. As parents we were with the students in their struggle. I am a parent to them - that's why they call me Ntate Ned. 