

# Wits contract cleaners' long walk to unionism

In 2000 Wits University decided to replace its cleaners with outsourced workers. **Noor Nieftagodien** charts the struggle of the new contract cleaners since that time to organise themselves against difficult odds.

About 20 000 contract cleaning workers across the country have just completed a two and a half month strike for higher wages. Workers demanded, but did not win an increase of 12% from current wage levels that range from R6,87 per hour in rural areas to R8,57 per hour in metropolitan areas. The employer body, the National Contract Cleaners Association (NCCA), awarded a paltry 6%, of which only 3% will go to actual wage increases. Workers will go home with a mere 23c per hour more than they currently earn. The arrogance of the employers was revealed in mid-September when they offered unions a further 1c! Unions rejected this miserly offer, but offered to reduce their wage demand to 10%.

The strike has highlighted the precarious position of contract workers, the majority women. Since the late 1990s the number of contract cleaners has risen sharply as companies and public institutions such as hospitals and universities have embraced neo-liberal prescriptions of outsourcing and belt-tightening. Today there are about 100 000 contract cleaners in an industry notorious for its low wages, poor working conditions and intransigent managements. Cleaners are especially vulnerable due to the unskilled nature of their work and

because they are scattered in disparate workplaces. As such they are easily replaceable and therefore at the mercy of unscrupulous employers.

As a result unionisation in this sector has been exceedingly difficult, with only 20% of contract cleaners organised. The problem is compounded by the presence of nearly 20 unions vying for members, although the majority of workers seem to be members of Satawu. The hardships experienced by these workers and the difficulties they have experienced in trying to organise themselves have been starkly shown over the past five years at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).

## GOOD FOR SOME

Critics of Wits University's restructuring programme in 2000 warned that low-paid workers would be the main victims of the drive to outsource services at the university. Major firms that dominate the outsourcing industry would be the main beneficiaries. At the time university and government officials dismissed these criticisms as unfounded, despite strong evidence to the contrary elsewhere in the world.

Outsourcing is a lucrative business for members of the National Contract Cleaning

Association (NCCA), especially the large companies such as Prestige and Supercare. You can see the grey and red uniforms of Supercare workers at universities, hospitals and office blocks across the country. In 2004, the company employed about 16 000 workers and had a healthy annual turnover of R450 million. In the same year it climbed on the Black Economic Empowerment bandwagon by striking a deal with Zungu Investment Company (Zico), which gave the chairman of Zico, the already financially empowered Sandile Zungu, a 25% share in the company. Typically, this narrow black empowerment has benefited only the shareholders, while its thousands of employees have remained impoverished.

Supercare is the main contract company at Wits, but the university has outsourced a whole range of services such as catering, landscaping, moving and technical services. Contract workers employed by Real Landscape, Sonke, Turftek, KKS and ABC Movers face similar and sometimes worse conditions than Supercare workers.

A veil of secrecy surrounds the operation of these companies at the university. For example, workers have tried to gain access to the contract between the university and Supercare to find out the value of



*Cleaners' march during their strike*

the agreement and to determine how much management is creaming off. They have been denied access to the contract.

Workers also allege that Supercare has created subsidiary companies, sometimes with the now customary promise of black empowerment, in order to consolidate its position as the preferred service provider at the university.

#### **SLAVE LABOUR FOR MOST**

Workers at the university immediately felt the harmful effects of outsourcing. Nearly 600 were retrenched. Those who were pushed into the employ of Supercare were hardly better off. The company drastically cut their wages and they lost benefits such as medical aid and bursaries for their children to study at the university.

Workers have from the outset raised a long list of grievances that managements of the service providers and the university have largely ignored. Chief among these complaints has been the miserable wages. In 1999 the minimum wage for contract cleaners was only R6

per hour or R960 per month, before deductions. Currently workers at Wits earn R8,57 per hour, which adds up to a paltry R1 371 per month. One worker who has been employed since 2002 takes home less than R1 000 after deductions.

Because these are the minimum rates set by the sectoral determination, Supercare claims to operate within the law. The university administration has unfortunately echoed these arguments. Workers have been told they should be grateful for employment. Many workers, who are often the breadwinners, spend up to 20% of their income on transport and are left with little for basic expenses. Invariably they are out of pocket by the middle of the month and come to work without food, are forced to borrow money and offer to do odd jobs, such as cleaning cars, to earn additional money.

While low wages is the most obvious exploitation suffered by contract workers at Wits, they are also subjected to other injustices that are reminiscent of labour conditions under apartheid.



For example, minimum health and safety requirements are almost non-existent. Cleaners have complained about using chemicals without protective clothing, which causes skin burns and respiratory problems. Supercare refuses to take responsibility for these problems and has told workers they should prove that the chemicals are the cause of their illnesses. In the absence of health benefits, workers have to bear the cost of medical treatment. It is common knowledge that several workers have over the past few years died of HIV/AIDS, yet neither the service providers nor the university has provided any material support to these workers or their families.

The issue that has most angers workers is the dictatorial managerial style of the service providers. Daily, workers complain of unfair treatment, verbal abuse

(racial slurs are quite common) and even physical abuse. According to workers, local managers run the operation like a slave plantation. "They treat us like children," lamented a 50 year old female worker, "Next thing, we have to call them baas."

Moreover, these workers feel alienated at the university. There exists a residual resentment towards them from some permanent employees, who accuse them of taking the jobs of the retrenched workers, even though many of the outsourced workers are ex-Wits employees. The division between permanent and outsourced/casual workers remains a key obstacle to the struggle of workers at the university. Unfortunately, the previous Nehawu (National Education & Allied Workers Union) leadership at the university compounded the problem by refusing to organise casual workers.

The university management's response to this state of affairs has been to deny responsibility towards the workers because, it claims, the university does not employ them. However, concerned staff members have pointed out that the university awards contracts to these service providers and therefore should insist on the implementation of decent working conditions.

### UNION FAILURES

Workers' experience with unions has been characterised by disappointments, caused by a combination of organisational incapacity of some unions and an unwillingness of other unions to confront the complexities of organising contract/casual workers. Despite several efforts by workers, the creation of an effective union representing contract workers at

the university remains elusive.

In 2002 the Socialist Student Movement and its political partners attempted to unionise Supercare workers by establishing a branch of the Durban-based Comsa at Wits. The campaign generated much interest and ended in a march by workers to the Supercare offices. However, once the initial excitement wore off most of these activists disappeared from the scene, unwilling to engage in the long, hard task of building a union. Since then few students have consistently supported the workers. Congress-aligned student bodies - Sasco, ANCYL and YCL - have only intermittently shown interest.

Workers were undeterred by this initial setback to form a union and constituted an organising committee - the Wits Workers' Support Committee, which consisted mainly of Supercare workers, but quickly drew in workers from other service providers. A handful of academics and students also supported this initiative. The committee met weekly to discuss grievances and to plan campaigns to highlight their working conditions to the broader university community. They saw the support committee as a temporary measure to maintain unity among workers and to prepare the ground for unionisation.

In 2003, after long discussions, workers decided to join Nehawu even though some were unsure about Nehawu's performance during the outsourcing process. The local organiser responded positively to the overture, which created considerable enthusiasm among workers who looked forward to challenging the employers with the backing of a strong union. Within a few weeks more than 100 workers

signed up to join Nehawu and elected a shop stewards' committee. Then there followed an extremely frustrating period during which the Nehawu organiser continuously failed to fulfil his promise to process the workers' applications.

When confronted by workers, the organiser claimed that Nehawu did not organise contract workers. Workers were angered by the contradictory messages coming from the union and approached Cosatu, which told them to join Nehawu because it was the only Cosatu union on campus.

However, it appeared that the mobilisation by contract workers came at an inconvenient time for the local Nehawu leaders who were in the middle of stitching together an out-of-court settlement with the university in the case brought by the union against the 2001 retrenchments. Again, the details of this agreement remained secret. Ex-Wits workers were merely informed they would receive a pay-out. The rest of the agreement, which allegedly included opportunities for the union and local organiser to operate as labour brokers, was never publicly revealed. In the event, the contract workers' search for affiliation to a Cosatu union was sacrificed. Workers were bitterly disappointed by the dishonest behaviour of the organiser and turned their backs on Nehawu.

### FINDING THE RIGHT UNION

Importantly, the local worker leaders, especially among the cleaners, managed to maintain a degree of unity under the banner of the Workers' Support Committee.

After some months, it was decided to approach a smaller independent union involved in the cleaning sector. This time workers

were more cautious and insisted that the organisers of Saccowu explain how they would effectively represent the workers. Discussion and debate followed, after which the majority of workers agreed to join Saccowu, although with reservations about the union's capacity to take on the service providers and university management.

The new round of unionisation triggered a mini transformation in labour relations at the university. Again, more than 100 workers joined the union, shop stewards were elected and training workshops were held. Every week between 40 and 60 workers attended lively meetings where the organisers reported on their activities and workers gave their input on what the union should be doing. Within a couple of months, a new militancy had emerged and workers were ready to start a campaign to improve their working conditions.

The union began to represent workers at disciplinary hearings and made demands about improving conditions. The local managements of Supercare, Turftek and Sonke seemed surprised by the effectiveness of the new union and initially allowed the union to organise worker meetings and to discuss grievances with them.

At the same time, however, Supercare began to implement measures to undermine the union. Their first salvo against the union consisted of the usual harassment, threats of dismissal and spying on meetings. When this course of action failed, it focused its harassment on key worker activists.

Then Supercare breathed new life into another union at the university, Meshawu (Municipality,

Education, State Health and Allied Workers' Union), which had not opposed the original outsourcing. Only a handful of cleaners had joined this union but companies gave it preferential treatment. When a Meshawu member assaulted workers from Saccowu, he got a light reprimand. At the same time the university and the service providers effectively banned Saccowu from holding meetings on the campus, arguing that they were not university employees and therefore did not have the right to use university facilities. Workers were told to hold their meetings at the company's premises!

This combined onslaught against the union exposed its weaknesses, as it proved unable to fight on various fronts. By the beginning of 2005 the union appeared exhausted and in disarray, causing workers to become disenchanted with the organisers. Workers were especially disappointed by the low wage settlement signed at the end of 2004 which they, perhaps unfairly, blamed on the union. The previous wage negotiations exposed the character of the unions in the cleaning sector, which prevented collective action across the sector. Under the circumstances the Saccowu branch at Wits fell apart.

Workers were more than ever disappointed by the unions. Many refused to even discuss joining any other union. The Workers' Committee tried desperately to hold together the core leadership, but had uneven success. The disillusionment among workers showed in several ways. A number of leading workers withdrew, partly because they feared being victimised. Another group of workers formed their own company to tender for the

outsourced services at the university. In order to salvage the situation those workers who remained in the Workers' Committee decided to rejoin Nehawu, which experienced a change of leadership. The new local leadership seemed more serious about organising casuals and overcoming the divisions between them and permanent employees.

On the eve of the strike most workers were not members of any union but the overwhelming majority joined the strike. Many cleaners decided to join a new union Nasawu (National Service and Allied Workers' Union) to protect them while on strike. Several solidarity pickets were held at the university and 1 500 staff and students signed a petition supporting the workers' wage demand and calling on the university to pressure Supercare to pay a decent wage.

However, the strike was undermined by the employment of scabs, who were initially secretly brought onto campus. Yet Wits management denied striking workers permission to picket at the university. Despite all the difficulties faced by contract cleaners at Wits and elsewhere, the strike showed a singular determination by workers to improve their conditions and to strike a blow against outsourcing. A new chapter in workers' struggles may be beginning, especially if Cosatu fulfils the promise of its recent Congress to prioritise the plight of contract and casual workers.

LB

*Noor Nieftagodien is the co-ordinator of Development Studies in the School of Social Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand.*