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The lessons of building...

#OutsourcingMustFall

The strike of outsourced cleaners, landscapers, security guards and caterers that began in Tshwane colleges and universities on 11 January under the banner of #OutsourcingMustFall opened a new round of campus protests. Developing into a rolling strike, major victories were won in Tshwane even as new strikes began at campuses in other cities. As important as fighting to end outsourcing were the terms on which it would be ended. The bold demand for a R10,000 per month minimum wage was central from the start. With workers' setting their sights high wage rises of 100% and more have been won which will lift workers and their families out of poverty.

Shaun Arendse

#OMF has the potential to become a reference point for the entire working class. Groups of workers from other sectors, including government departments, parastatals, banking and retail workers have organised themselves under the #OMF banner. Some, such as outsourced workers contracted to the City of Tshwane (COT), have taken strike action alongside the Tshwane college and university workers. The #OMF strikes have demonstrated the combativeness of the working class and their willingness to struggle when given a clear and bold lead.

The Workers and Socialist Party initiated #OMF. Our comrades have led the movement in Tshwane, Cape Town and Bloemfontein. This has led to us being slandered by the likes of Gideon Du Plessis of the Solidarity union accusing us of inciting "rioting" and having "hidden agendas". These accusations are identical to those thrown at us in the past by the ANC showing the shared agenda of these two anti-working class organisations.

Origins of the struggle

As with all struggles, #OMF did not just fall from the sky. At root of course was workers' enormous anger at outsourcing and labour broking which has become widespread under the ANC in both the public and private sectors. For years, bosses have boosted their own profits and those of 'tenderpreneur' parasites by forcing workers to live on poverty pay as low as R2,000 per month with no benefits. Outsourcing and labour broking have been an important part of the ANC leadership's



Tshwane workers march to Unisa's Sunnyside campus to call out other workers

strategy to create a black elite as a social base for their rule, raising them up on the backs of the super-exploitation of the working class.

Over the past decade, the ANC-aligned Cosatu trade union federation was regularly forced to reflect the anger of workers by passing resolutions against the worst excesses of outsourcing and labour broking whilst doing nothing in practice to fight it. As a sop to the pro-ANC Cosatu leadership for their loyalty in the bruising Tripartite Alliance faction fight that led to the expulsion of the metalworkers' union NUMSA, new legislation came into force in January 2015 improving the rights of outsourced and labour broker workers. The law required bosses to make workers permanent on the same pay and benefits as permanent staff after three months. It would therefore apply to all existing outsourced and labour broker workers by the start of April.

From the point of view of the ANC and Cosatu leaderships this law was always intended to be a 'dead letter'. No further proof is required than the absence of any serious advertising campaign to make workers aware of their new rights or the lack of provision made for enforcement via a regime of workplace inspections. In the more than twelve months between the legislation coming into force and the start of the Tshwane #OMF strikes – four times longer than was now legal – no employers voluntarily made outsourced or labour broker workers permanent.

NGOs such as the Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO) took up the issue early in 2015 correctly recognising the potential to mobilise hundreds of thousands of these marginalised and ruthlessly oppressed workers. WASP engaged them with a view

to supporting their initiatives. CWAO organised workshops and committed to spreading news of the new legislation by word of mouth. But they rejected the idea raised with them by WASP members of mobilising workers into a national campaign for a well-organised, consciously planned and co-ordinated mass struggle. They preferred to leave organisation to 'spontaneity' and in the meantime chose to fight outsourcing via the courts.

But WASP rejected this approach which #OutsourcingMustFall has vindicated. If the infinitely superior resources of the organisations that gathered in CWAO's Khanya College meetings had been mobilised, to say nothing of the wider trade union movement, these achievements could have been greatly surpassed.

#FeesMustFall

It was on the campuses in the course of 2015 that outsourcing would finally start to be seriously challenged. The 'October 6th movement' initiated by students and academics at Wits University and the University of Johannesburg, in which WASP members participated (see previous issue of Izwi), included the demand for an end to outsourcing in a planned programme of protests addressing many issues of concern to students, academics and workers. Protests against outsourcing went ahead on a number of campuses on 6 October.

However, it was the outbreak in mid-October of the mighty #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement (see pages 6-7) that popularised the plight of outsourced campus workers country-wide by promoting the #EndOutsourcing slogan on social media. Mass protests culminated in a march on Union Buildings where the

students' defeated the proposed tuition fee hikes. This gave enormous confidence to workers.

Many of the campus-level agreements signed between students and university managements that ended the #FeesMustFall protests included agreements to end outsourcing in principle. However, as with the legislation mentioned above, in reality managements were kicking the issue into the long grass by assigning various 'task teams' to investigate the terms of insourcing. However, many higher and further education institutions did not even have these limited agreements.

#OMF begins

The blow inflicted on the ANC government and the university managements by #FMF had thrown them on to the back foot. WASP and our youth wing, the Socialist Youth Movement (SYM), acted to seize the initiative and push the workers' demands forward.

At the University of Free State, SYM assisted workers to organise and submit a memorandum to management. On 10 November they held a march which won the immediate concession from management to end outsourcing and raise wages by more than 100%. In Tshwane, WASP members began leafleting institutions and speaking to workers from the end of October. The overwhelming response led to the calling of a mass meeting in Burgers Park on 14 November. Several hundred workers responded from all six higher and further education institutions in Tshwane. It was from these regular mass meetings that the #OutsourcingMustFall name emerged. The next month was spent drawing every campus of these six institutions into the campaign. A similar campaign was embarked upon in Cape Town.

Even though the media focused on the campuses, #OMF never limited itself to the higher education sector. From the very first meetings in Tshwane outsourced COT and Department of Basic Education workers were involved.

Memorandums were submitted demanding an end to outsourcing and a R10,000 minimum wage. At first managements responded by either ignoring #OMF or referring workers to ANC-aligned unions such as NEHAWU. This was despite workers never having been members! But in the face of the determined strike action that began on 11 January managements began negotiating. Agreements were reached relatively quickly at the University of Pretoria, the University of South Africa and Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University with massive pay rises agreed.

Threat to status quo

The management at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), Tshwane South College and Tshwane North College proved harder to wear down. Especially at TUT, a game of dirty tricks, violence and intimidation played out over months as management encouraged the defeat of the strike (see interview on page 10). A similar situation developed at COT.

The reason for the stubbornness of the TUT, COT and college managements was their closer links to the ANC. These institutions are more closely woven into the legalised corruption of the ANC's patronage system based on handing out labour broking and outsourcing tenders in return for political favours. The ANC-aligned Cosatu unions, such as NEHAWU and SAMWU, are the policemen of this system. Their role has been to ensure that a challenge from workers does not emerge. But #OMF threatened this entire system by taking place outside of the existing bargaining structure and its recognised amagundwane unions.

Workers' committees

The threat that #OMF represented arose from the manner in which it was organised and led. This built on the previous experience of WASP's forerunner, the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM), in the Post Office workers struggles that defeated labour broking long before the labour law amendments and which was enriched on a far wider scale by the historic mineworkers' strikes that followed the 2012 Marikana massacre. The strength of those strikes lay in the unity of workers which was built through the formation of strike committees independent of any trade union or political party. These committees, accountable to the mass of mineworkers whether they had union cards, party cards or none, were able to cut across the lines of division amongst the mineworkers that had been created by decades of class collaboration by the ANC-aligned union NUM.

Taking the same broad approach to building #OMF overcame the politically divided landscape on the campuses which were littered with different student organisations and unions. The role of independent workers' committees marked out #OMF from #FMF and other student dominated campaigns against outsourcing. At the same time #OMF was clear that all those who supported the struggle against outsourcing were welcome to support the campaign. #OMF made efforts to reach out, especially to students, and bring all those forces genuine about supporting workers into the campaign with freedom to argue their ideas before the workers.

This method proved decisive in forging solidarity and an unbreakable unity among the workers. The sense of pride felt by

workers in their power to lead struggle that came with such organisation meant, for example, that the divisive efforts of the EFF Student Command to turn #OMF into their own party 'project' failed dismally (see interview on page 10).

Tactics not fetishes

Many among the middle class academic left have made a fetish out of so-called 'new' forms of organisation. They often promote the idea of 'grass roots movements' that are 'spontaneous' as capable of replacing 'traditional' methods of organisation such as trade unions and political parties. WASP does not share this view. The middle class academic left fail to grasp that it is not the form of organisation first and foremost that explains betrayals of the working class but the lack of a programme that clearly calls for a break with capitalism. Upon the basis of their wrong analysis, the form of organisation in struggle becomes an end in itself.

But for WASP, organising the #OMF struggle and the mineworkers' strikes of 2012 upon the basis of independent workers committees was a tactical necessity flowing from the stage of the class struggle. The tactic represents a step forward for the task faced by the working class in this period of creating new class independent organisations. In the future, with the progress of this task, campaigns such as #OMF would rightly be the 'project' of a new socialist trade union federation or new mass workers party. The #OMF campaign has provided the working class with an important example of how new mass working class organisations can be built through struggles that demonstrate in practice their relevance to workers (see editorial on page 2).

Struggle will continue

Many workers who took part in the strike are continuing the struggle back in the workplace to ensure that agreements that have been won are honoured. Other workers have been forced to make tactical retreats in order to rebuild their strength and fight again another day. New groups of workers, like the outsourced Shoprite workers in Centurion or the campus workers in the Eastern Cape at Walter Sisulu University, have only just begun their campaign. The #OMF campaign will continue and in the course of it the process of building the working class's confidence and independence will be strengthened and deepened.

Izwi says...

Any and all groups of outsourced workers in any sector or any industry, members of existing unions or none, should contact us for guidance in organising a campaign