

Victory for South Point workers!

The Struggle Against Outsourcing continues

South Point, which owns multiple buildings is one of the largest suppliers of office space in Braamfontein, Johannesburg and provides student accommodation to Wits University and the University of Johannesburg. It markets itself as creating a modern progressive space for students, 'creatives' and start-ups. However, its treatment of workers shows the ruthlessness of capital below this thin veneer.

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One of the main strategies of capital for reducing the power of its workforce is outsourcing. This makes it easier for companies to avoid bargaining with organised labour. For workers this means barriers to unionisation, precarious employment, fewer benefits and lower wages. It means double exploitation as a middleman captures an additional component of the value created by workers' labour.

Despite the victories of students and workers in achieving the insourcing of Wits workers, the company that operates student residences has been embarking on a programme of outsourcing which already has seen the outsourcing of its cleaning staff.

Lucas Thomo is a front desk operator (FDO) and shop steward in the recognised union, the South African Industrial Commercial and Allied Workers Union (SAICWU). He describes the condition of workers as follows: "*South African workers are still working under the slavery of apartheid like our forefathers. South Point is no different. Workers are still treated as slaves but as workers we are prepared to fight this treatment till the end.*"

A female worker, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of victimisation, is one of the cleaners whose job has been outsourced to a company called Servest. She states that South Point and Servest "*forget workers are human beings and treat us like rubbish*".

The conditions under which the workers of South Point worked included a low minimum wage of R17.75, the absence



The South Point workers

of benefits such as a provident fund, and the threat of outsourcing. The central demands of SAICWU were therefore:

- A living wage of R8,500 per month
- No outsourcing of workers
- The insourcing of all cleaners
- Benefits including a provident fund

Attempts to negotiate with South Point management proved fruitless. They adopted an intransigent stance. So workers began strike action on 10 September 2018. A strike is not simply the withdrawal of labour but a test of strength. Critical to the strike was the building of a coalition in support of the workers demands, including organisations of the students who stay in South Point residences.

The campaign called on South Point's small business and NGO tenants to withdraw their rent until workers' demands were addressed. Lucas Thomo credits this support for the eventual successes of the strike: "*...thanks to all community, students, business owners who are renting at South Point for the support we received from you. The strike, it was very successful because of the support we received from the community.*" Further, SAICWU were able to call on the leadership of SAFTU, to which they are affiliated, to lend their experience to the negotiations.

Through the strike and the campaign workers were able to win a settlement

on 3 October 2018 that included the following:

- A minimum wage of R22 per hour (an increase of more than 20%)
- A process of engagement for a 4-6% increase for workers earning above this wage
- A provident fund to be effective from 1 March 2019
- Insourcing of cleaners from 1 March 2019 depending on an exit agreement between South Point and the contractors

But following this victory, South Point and Servest have sought to claw back power. In an attempt to create fragmentation and fear, Servest suspended 14 of the 90 cleaners for participating in the strike (they have since been reinstated with warnings). Working conditions for outsourced workers remain inhumane. The same anonymous cleaner reports that "*We are working under pressure. The company agreed that we will have 15 minutes of tea time, now they want to cancel that. They forget we cannot work on an empty stomach.*" South Point is refusing to grant the wage increment for workers earning above the minimum.

While for the workers of South Point, the struggle against exploitation continues, the victories won in the strike put them in a far stronger position. The workers have gained confidence, experience of struggle, and have built a formidable social coalition that can be marshalled in future action. *A luta continua!*