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To cite this article: Mondli Hlatshwayo (2020): Solidarity During the ‘Outsourcing Must Fall’ Campaign: The Role of Different Players in Ending Outsourcing at South African Universities, Politikon, DOI: 10.1080/02589346.2020.1795993

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2020.1795993

Published online: 20 Jul 2020.
Solidarity During the ‘Outsourcing Must Fall’ Campaign: The Role of Different Players in Ending Outsourcing at South African Universities

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ABSTRACT
In South Africa, outsourced workers began their struggles in the 1990s, when universities started to implement the outsourcing of services that were considered non-core by university administrations. In analysing the struggle against outsourcing of 2015 and 2016, different scholars have tended to emphasise the role of either the outsourced workers or the student activists of ‘#Fees Must Fall’ (FMF) – a campaign which opposed fee increases in 2015 and 2016 and took up the cause of outsourced workers. Based on interviews with workers directly affected by outsourcing, student activists and trade unionists, as well as internet sources and original documents, this article gives an account of the roles of the various groups involved in the campaign: the students who were part of FMF, the workers who were directly affected by outsourcing, NGOs and socialist groupings who united and defeated outsourcing in 2015 and 2016. The solidarity between students, workers, political groups and some academics ended what the unions could not end for close to twenty-five years in less than a year.

Introduction
In March 2015, students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) called for the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, who, in the nineteenth century, promoted colonialism and racism in South Africa and other parts of the continent. Protests against colonial symbols and demands for the decolonisation of higher education gained credence, especially at the University of Pretoria (UP), Stellenbosch University (SU), Rhodes University (RU), and even at Oxford University in Britain. The Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) campaign also highlighted, through protest and social media, the abysmal working conditions of outsourced university workers (Luckett and Mzobe 2016).

Shortly after the RMF campaign, in October 2015, students protested against fee hikes and called for more widespread access to higher education. The student protests of 2015 lent crucial support to workers who had been struggling against outsourcing since the early 1990s. Luckett and Pontarelli (2016, 1) elaborate: ‘What has been called the #Fees Must Fall and #EndOutsourcing (or #OutsourcingMustFall) movements shook South African politics and shifted the national agenda.’ Subsequent to the campaigns of 2015 and 2016 to end outsourcing, scholars analysed the roles played in them by various actors.

In relation to OMF, Satgar (2016) states that at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in October 2015, workers risked dismissal for joining student protests during the FMF campaign. Satgar (2016) recognises the impetus provided by students for FMF during the OMF
campaign at Wits but stresses that outsourced workers already had social agency which included struggling under the banner of the National Education Health and Allied Workers’ Union (NEHAWU), a health and education union, in the 1990s. Satgar (2016) downplays the role of the student activists who participated in and often led OMF. In fact, as this article will show, the entry of RMF and FMF into struggles against outsourcing was a game-changer. University managements that denounced the campaigns against outsourcing made sudden about-turns and reluctantly signed the agreements that led to wage increases for workers and the end of outsourcing.

Another strand of the literature on OMF seems to suggest that both the outsourced workers and the student activists of FMF played a crucial role in the reversal of outsourcing by Wits in 2015 (Luckett and Mzobe 2016; Luckett and Pontarelli 2016). In an interview conducted by Luckett, Deliwe, a female worker leader at Wits, said:

It was because of the combined power of the students and workers. When the students united they opened the doors that were long shut. They forced ears that were deaf to listen to us. Previously they heard us but ignored us. The Wits Workers Solidarity Committee has been saying ‘end outsourcing’ for years. (Luckett and Mzobe 2016, 97)

Luckett and Mzobe (2016) recognise the role of organisers and the combined power of workers and students but stress that the FMF campaign and the actions of the students in particular, constituted a powerful force that combined with that of workers to push back at outsourcing.

Another strand of the literature on OMF is represented by Hamilton (2017), who emphasises roles played by socialist groups, left-wing students and GIWUSA (General Industries Workers of South Africa). Hamilton (2017, 182) argues that the popular education carried out by ‘a revolutionary party’ and other political activists was a decisive factor in OMF in Tshwane (the administrative capital of South Africa). GIWUSA, a union with a strongly socialist ethos, along with other socialist groups, made a strong contribution to the ending of outsourcing in the Tshwane area (Rees 2011; Hamilton 2017). To be more specific, according to Hamilton (2017), the campaign resulted in wage increases for the workers and, in 2016, the repudiation of outsourcing by the University of Pretoria (UP), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU) and the University of South Africa (UNISA).

While this article recognises the value of each contribution to the narrative (or account) of OMF (Luckett and Mzobe 2016; Satgar 2016; Hamilton 2017), instead of writing about the role of each group (workers, students and activists), its purpose is to demonstrate that those involved made up a proverbial ‘orchestra’, comprising workers, who were the direct victims of outsourcing, student activists, political activists and NGOs. All of these groups, separately and in combination, delivered the victory against outsourcing in 2015 and 2016. For example, the literature on OMF is silent on the role played by the NGOs before and during OMF.

Another limitation is that the existing narratives on OMF tend to share a university-based or a city-based focus. While they help to understand the political dynamics at each university or in each city, an overview of OMF, which summarises developments in the organisation at different universities, is also overdue. Satgar (2016) and Luckett and Mzobe (2016) discuss OMF campaign in the context of Wits; Hamilton’s (2017) research focuses on OMF campaign in universities in the city of Tshwane. To fill the gap, this
article also provides an overview of solidarity in the context of OMF at Wits, the University of Johannesburg (UJ), UCT and universities in the Tshwane area. All these institutions had visible and effective campaigns against outsourcing. This article shows that different social groups, including workers, students, academics, NGOs and activist groups, played different roles in delivering an end to outsourcing at these institutions within four months: an outcome that the unions could not achieve in almost twenty years.

The findings and arguments presented here are based on an analysis of documentary sources and thirty-five in-depth interviews conducted in Gauteng Province between 2016 and 2018. Twenty of the interviewees were with outsourced workers at universities, ten were with student activists who participated in OMF and five were with trade unionists. All the interviewees were asked to reflect on their roles and challenges and on the successes of the OMF campaign. Due to limited space, only eleven of the interviewees are quoted, but their views are representative of those who were not quoted. Pseudonyms were used to protect the interviewees’ identities, and ethical clearance was obtained from the UJ Education Faculty’s Ethics Committee in 2016.

In developing the argument outlined above, it is necessary to begin by discussing the evolution of outsourcing at South African universities in the context of the austerity measures and neoliberal strategies implemented by the South African state. This is to show that student activists of the FMF joined a struggle that was already in existence without making any (many) substantial gains. The second part of the article, anchored by new interview data, internet sources and documents, presents the argument that the FMF campaign, in 2015, gave impetus to workers’ struggles against outsourcing, compelling university administrations to reverse outsourcing and increase the wages of workers, in some cases by more than 200%. Evidence shows that left-wing groups, NGOs and GIWUSA all contributed to the ending of outsourcing.

Luckett and Mzobe (2016) and Satgar (2016) have argued that the National Union of Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), which was supposed to be the mouthpiece for the outsourced workers, did not generally lead the campaign. Some interviewees held that the union tended to side with management of various university campuses.

The rise of outsourcing in the 1990s

In 1996, the democratically elected government of South Africa introduced the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy, which many political commentators viewed as a self-imposed economic structural adjustment programme similar to those frequently prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to countries in the Global South (Adelzadeh 1996; Bond 1998, 2006). In essence, GEAR called for the state to promote precarious forms of work, privatisation and the reduction of social spending. From the mid-1990s and in the context of GEAR, commentators on higher education noted a decline in real terms in state subsidies for higher education in the 1990s and 2000s, resulting in universities adopting measures such as outsourcing and student fee increments to run universities (Jansen 2004; Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008; Habib 2019). According to Bitzer and De Jager (2018), state funding dropped from 49% of the budgets of universities in 2000 to 38% in 2014, a decline of just below 25%. Higher education has not been immune to austerity measures, or from what scholars call
‘marketisation’, which entails running the institutions according to market and cost-saving principles (Nash 2006; Vally 2007).

During this period, driven largely by the need to save costs and attract new streams of income, universities tended to make a distinction between core and non-core functions. This led to the outsourcing of cleaning, gardening, security, and in some instances, printing. The argument of university managers was that teaching and research were the core functions of university departments and the rest had to be outsourced to reduce the institutions’ budget deficits (Adler et al. 2000; Kenny and Clarke 2000; Johnson 2001; Van der Walt et al. 2002; Grossman 2006).

Between 1996 and 2000, Mamphela Ramphele, who was part of the liberation struggle from the 1960s until the 1990s, became a Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town (UCT). Ramphele implemented outsourcing of cleaning and other services considered to be non-essential at UCT, mirroring the austerity measures prescribed by the IMF, World Bank and GEAR. In 2000, Ramphele joined the World Bank as one of the managers and continued to advocate policies which promoted austerity measures that were generalised attacks on the poor and working poor, especially in the Global South (Grossman 2006).

The result of outsourcing at universities was that there were ‘core’ staff members with better working conditions, better wages and benefits such as medical aid. At the other end of the spectrum, there were vulnerable workers earning low wages, working under bad conditions and receiving fewer or no benefits. This two-tier labour system was already a sore point because workers doing the same jobs often had huge differentials in pay and conditions of work. A general worker employed by a university and doing the same work as an outsourced worker earned up to three times more (Van der Walt et al. 2002).

Despite attempts by workers, students, some academics and some community formations to oppose the politics of privatisation and the employment of what Standing (2011) terms the ‘precariat’, it became the norm at universities. Those who were outsourced were workers with no job security; they tended to be black women who were also single parents (Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006; Bardill 2008; Moagi 2016). In other words, the losers at institutions where precarious forms of work such as outsourcing were sanctioned were black women who, according to feminist scholars, faced triple oppression during colonialism and apartheid: oppression on the basis of gender, race and class (Kenny 2007; Bardill 2008).

When outsourcing was introduced at Wits in 2000, about 613 workers were retrenched and only 250 workers were re-hired by private companies. This led to a reduction in wages from R2 277 a month to R1 200 per month; non-wage benefits were also lost by the re-employed workers (Satgar 2016). A female worker employed as a cleaner at Wits was reported to work for 12 h and 40 min a day; she then went home and prepared meals and did other chores for 2.5 h. In short, the woman worker laboured for close to 16 h a day, excluding the time taken to travel to and from work (Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006).

In a study that examines the working conditions of outsourced black women at UCT, Bardill (2008, 139) reports: ‘The increased workload is possible because work is labour-intensive…. Hiring fewer workers to do the same or a larger amount of work is a means of reducing costs for the companies.’ Outsourcing therefore increased the burden of work for black women employed by private companies to provide cleaning services to UCT. Outsourcing intensified their social and economic oppression, and the women interviewed tended to be single parents.
Confi rming that the social and economic burden amongst black women has been increased deepened by outsourcing, Dalu, a 27-year-old female employee at UJ, had this to say:

I have two kids – an eight-year-old and a nine-year-old. I was earning R2 700 after all deduction. I stay in Hillbrow and I have to pay R1 700 for rent. Remember I also have to pay for transport and buy food. I also have to pay school fees. (Dalu, interview, 2 December 2016, Johannesburg)

Resisting outsourcing before FMF and OMF

This section of the article shows that outsourced workers in universities, with the support of student activists and some academics, began opposing outsourcing in the 1990s. However, although there were some small and partial victories, outsourcing continued. It is also important to note that NEHAWU, which was supposed to spearhead the workers’ struggles against outsourcing, was not always visible.

Satgar (2016) and Luckett and Mzobe (2016) point out that the struggle against outsourcing at universities is as old as outsourcing itself. Workers who are directly affected by outsourcing have consistently struggled against it, and in the process have built alliances with students and academics. However, it must be emphasised that workers also built alliances with NGOs – something that is not covered in the literature.

In his article on the evolution of the struggle against outsourcing in South African universities in the 1990s, Buhlungu (2004, 3) states:

In Johannesburg two developments, namely, the Johannesburg City Council’s Egoli 2002 plan and Wits University’s Wits 2001 plan were seen by activists as manifestations of the cost-cutting economic regime that was unfolding since the adoption of the GEAR macro-economic plan in 1996. In addition, the Egoli 2002 plan represented the introduction of cost-recovery in municipal service provision.

In July 2000, to advance privatisation in Johannesburg and outsourcing at Wits, the City of Johannesburg and Wits organised a conference called ‘Urban Futures’ at Wits. An organised group of workers, students and community activists opposed to privatisation and outsourcing in Johannesburg and at Wits marched into the conference venue. Later in the same year, the South African Municipal Workers Unions (SAMWU), the Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union (IMATU), and NEHAWU joined with political student formations, namely the South African Students Congress (SASCO), the Wits Student Representative Council (SRC) and the Post-graduate Association (PGA), as well as with community activists in Gauteng, to launch the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) (Buhlungu 2004). There were other attempts to challenge outsourcing at South African universities: for example, at the University of Durban-Westville (now part of the University of KwaZulu-Natal), student activists and workers organised under the Combined Staff Association (CORMSA), an organisation formed by support and academic staff members and used to challenge the privatisation of security and catering services in 1995 (Khan 2006).

Established unions like NEHAWU were not consistently involved in the campaigns against outsourcing and this led to outsourced workers relying heavily on alliances with student activists and some academics, and in some instances, NGOs. Solidarity committees comprising outsourced workers, student activists and academics were formed in the 2000s to lead the struggle against outsourcing. Luckett and Mzobe (2016, 95) elaborate:
In response to this fragmentation, there were efforts among workers, along with progressive students and staff, to build alternative organisations and structures to unite workers and to build solidarity for workers within the university community. These include the UCT Workers Forum, the Wits Workers Solidarity Committee and the UJ Persistent Solidarity Forum.

At UCT, some outsourced workers felt that NEHAWU and other unions were not taking their cause seriously and formed the Workers Forum in 2003 (Left Students’ Forum 2019). In 2007, the Workers Support Committee (WSC), which comprised a group of academics and students activists, through protests and marches, pressured UCT management to develop the UCT Code of Conduct for Outsourced Service Providers. This action was intended to improve the conditions of outsourced workers (Bardill 2008, 172). In 2010, the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), a Cape Town-based NGO, also supported outsourced workers at UCT by educating them dialogically about their rights (ILRIG 2007).

In 2013 outsourced workers who belonged to the Persistent Solidarity Committee (PSC), a forum that supported them at UJ, informed some academics and student activists about their working conditions. Subsequently, some academics and student activists belonging to the solidarity forum asked NGOs such as the Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO), to run workshops which educated workers, in a dialogical fashion, about their rights (PSC 2016).

For example, in 2013 40 cleaners, most of them women, attended a workshop which examined the laws governing outsourced workers’ rights, which were generally violated by the contractors hired by the university. On behalf of the UJ workers, CWAO approached the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), a state body for managing conflict between employers and employees, which organised workshops for precarious workers at UJ (PSC 2016).

CWAO also asked David Cartwright Attorneys (Cartwright 2014) to advise outsourced workers at UJ on the legalities of campaigning against outsourcing. Another two-day workshop was held on 13 and 14 February 2016 to discuss labour law amendments and their implications for outsourced workers (Cartwright 2016). Advised by CWAO, PSC wrote to the Department of Labour, asking them to inspect the working conditions of employees working at the student centre on the UJ Bunting Road Campus. With the assistance of CWAO, which attended some of the meetings with management, PSC applied pressure which led to a wage increase for workers in the student centre from R1 600 to R2 300, which was close to the Department of Labour’s (DOL) sector determinations for the cleaning sector (DOL, letter 20 March 2014; Hlatshwayo 2017).

Maku, who was a NUMSA shop steward in the 1980s and worked as a cleaner, benefited directly from the intervention achieved by CWAO at UJ. Maku (interview, 27 January 2017) elaborates:

I visited the offices of CWAO in Germiston (a town near Johannesburg). I got so much information. That opened my mind about what was due to workers. I was trying to make things right for myself and other workers. I met Ighsaan [Schroeder, who heads the advice office] in 2015 while attending meetings of other workers in Germiston. I then attended workshops in Newtown [at the Workers’ Museum] that were facilitated by Ighsaan and other people. These workshops taught us about the role of institutions like the Department of Labour in protecting our rights. This then helped us to lodge complaints with the Department of Labour.
The ‘October’ campaign

Many members of solidarity committees were of the view that outsourcing on campuses like UJ, UCT and Wits needed to be elevated to a national campaign. In pursuit of this goal, various workers and solidarity committees on campuses, especially at those universities, called for workers, students and academics to protest against outsourcing on 6 October 2015 (Luckett & Mzobe 2016). Predicated on struggles waged and dating back to the 1990s, committees of outsourced workers, academics and students crafted a Workers’ Charter, which emphasised the fact that outsourced workers were earning starvation wages and worked under poor conditions. The Charter included demands for living wages, job security and ‘…the right to free tuition for any worker and worker’s child studying at the university. Support for workers to complete their schooling education must be provided’ (Wits Workers’ Solidarity Committee 2015, 1).

One of the limitations of the charter was that it made no demands that related specifically to the conditions of the black women who make up the majority of outsourced workers. Besides general health and safety demands, there were no specific demands that related to conditions of pregnant workers, sexual harassment, childcare or family responsibility leave – these were all the issues that the women were concerned about. In other words, the demands were ‘gender blind’ in the context of a gendered struggle (Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006; Bardill 2008).

Demands against outsourcing were submitted to administrations at UCT, UJ and Wits on 6 October 2015. Commenting on the protest at Wits, Deliwe Mzobe, a worker leader, said: ‘The workers look up to the students. They will do anything for the students. We had recently had the October 6 protest against outsourcing, which was a success due to the students’ (Luckett and Mzobe 2016, 96).

At UCT, Chumani Maxhwele, who initiated RMF, had this to say about the connection between outsourced workers and students:

Today’s protest is simple. It is in solidarity with black workers. They clean our dustbins. They clean our classrooms. … These are our parents, our brother and sisters who are doing work at the university. It is wrong to outsource these workers. We want them to be insourced. We want them to work for the university so that they can earn decent wages and have benefits. (Maxhwele 2015)

The entry of students

Students who were already campaigning against fee increases expressed renewed solidarity with the outsourced workers. Theorising about ‘social movement spillover’, or how a specific set of demands and issues may facilitate a revival of another movement, Meyer and Whittier (1994, 293) write:

We have argued that women’s social movement community affected the peace movement through organisational coalitions, an overlapping social movement community, shared personnel, and the effects on the external environment. At the same time the peace mobilisation of the 1980s afforded feminists the opportunity to stage political challenges in the absence of favourable feminist mobilization. This case highlights the spillover effect in a period where mass activity was relatively infrequent.
It can be argued that FMF ‘spilt over’ the existing struggles of outsourced workers and provided a renewed impetus for the workers who had been struggling against outsourcing since the 1990s. Besides FMF’s shining the spotlight on chronic under-funding of higher education in South Africa (Jansen 2017), the campaign also changed employment relations on campuses by ending outsourcing at South African universities.

Parallel to the campaign to end outsourcing and the demonstrations of 6 October 2015, a political confrontation was imminent between students and university authorities. On 14 October 2015, the Wits Council announced fee increases ranging from 10% to 12%. The students’ campaign opposing the increases was dubbed ‘Fees must Fall’. It led to a complete shutdown of Wits and other universities. Outsourced workers at Wits were part of the student protests. Later, workers joined student protests; in some instances, they asked students to appeal to workers to join the protests. Despite their vulnerability, workers took risks and supported the students by joining the demonstrations.

On 17 October 2015, management and students at Wits signed an agreement that workers who participated in FMF would not be subjected to disciplinary action. On 22 October 2015, thousands of students, workers and members of community-based organisations marched to the headquarters of the ruling ANC to hand over a memorandum which included demands that increases in tuition fees be cancelled, and that outsourcing would end (Luckett and Pontarelli 2016; Ntshingila 2016)

Struggles to end outsourcing in universities were then called ‘Outsourcing must Fall’,reviving the long-term campaign led by workers to end outsourcing on campuses. The campaign at UCT led to the signing of an agreement between UCT management and NEHAWU on 28 October 2015. Outsourced workers were to be absorbed by UCT, with better wages and some benefits, including allowing the children of workers to study free of charge at UCT (Omar, 29 October 2015, News). On 1 November 2015, Wits’ management reached an agreement with students and workers to end outsourcing (ENCA, 1 November 2015, ENCA).

Following the signing of agreements at Wits and UCT, on 2 November 2015 a campaign dubbed ‘Occupy UJ’ was launched to demand the insourcing of workers at UJ. Wits students and workers joined the protest, during which workers and students camped outside the campus. Support from Wits included supplying refreshments for workers and students at UJ. The occupation came to a temporary halt when 163 students and workers were apprehended, including a former Wits SRC President, Shaeera Kalla and seven student activists from Wits. After they were released, the strike continued outside UJ’s main campus. To strengthen the resolve of strikers, night vigils with participants from other universities and civil society were held outside UJ on 8 and 13 November 2015 (South African History Online 2015).

Xava, one of the student activists at the forefront of OMF at UJ, had this to say about the role of the students:

We were involved in the strike on a day-to-day basis. At UJ we [the student activists] had to lead the strike which happened in October and November 2016. We had to wake up early in the morning, have meeting with workers, give them hope and confidence. We had to mobilise workers. … The university kept on sending SMSs threatening workers, and telling them to stop the strike. We had to keep workers united.
In explaining this victory scored by workers, Satgar (2016) suggests that the narrative that student activists were catalytic in clinching the victory downplays or undermines the social agency of workers and the organising done by various university-based structures of workers and academics, whose goal had been the reversal of the outsourcing policy. Supporting the statement that workers pledged solidarity with FMF and initiated the alliance with students which led to the ending of outsourcing, Satgar (2016, 21) argues: ‘Workers supported students in their shutdown of the university [Wits University]; they placed their bodies on the line and provided resources and the numbers.’ While this statement is true, it cannot be denied that the students and the FMF brought the necessary pressure to bear on universities for them to halt outsourcing - even at Wits, where the struggle had been most confrontational.

Deliwe Mzobe, a worker leader who was at the forefront of the OMF campaign at Wits, praised the students who ‘sacrificed their future’ to make sure that she and other workers become permanent workers at Wits University (cited in Fengu, City Press, 12 March 2017). Put simply, FMF facilitated the formation of OMF. This is not to claim that there were no struggles against outsourcing before FMF, but before its existence, these struggles were not given national prominence and a strong presence in the public domain.

**Student political formations**

The literature on OMF has tended to ignore or downplay the contribution made by student political organisations that were sympathetic to the workers’ cause (Luckett and Mzobe 2016; Satgar 2016). What has emerged from the interviews is that student political formations were central to building solidarity with the outsourced workers. Shaeera Kalla belonged to the Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA) at Wits, an alliance of ANC-aligned student formations, which included the South African Students’ Congress (SASCO), a student organisation which supported outsourced workers before the OMF, especially at Wits. One of the student activists aligned to the ANC spoke about how student political organisations at Wits had adversarial relationships, especially during SRC elections, but that they put aside their differences temporarily and worked together to support outsourced workers, especially during OMF. Hlezi, a Wits student, elaborated:

So, at Wits what most people don’t understand is that it has very weird political dynamics. When it comes to [SRC] elections on campus, winning SRC, it’s very political. It is highly divisive as well we just know who’s who and who’s who in the zoo. But when it comes to external matters… not really external but something that’s more for the collective, it’s, it’s… it’s hard to close space for other people because you, you need to pull support from all different sorts of people, not just your constituency only, but everyone needs to be on board. (Hlezi, interview, 9 October 2016)

Mbokodo, a student leader at UP, related that a central committee of political student formations at UP spearheaded the FMF at UP. Mbokodo also remarked that, unlike the PYA, structures on other campuses, such as the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and the PYA at UP adopted an autonomous approach based on supporting the local struggles of students and workers. However, Mbokodo acknowledged the leading role played by the Student Command of the Economic Freedom Fighters, a student wing of the Economic Freedom Fighters, at UP. She said, ‘The outsourcing struggle at the University of Pretoria
is a very difficult one because by and large it was championed by the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command’ (Mbokodo, interview, October 10, 2016).

Mushe worked as a security guard at one of the universities. Asked to comment on the role of student political formations in Tshwane, he said: ‘SASCO! They did not support us. Only EFF was the only organisation that was interested and willing to help us to get what we are fighting for’ (Mushe, Interview, 14 August 2016). On 27 January 2016, at TUT, there were reports that students alleged to be SASCO members attacked striking workers and students who were protesting against outsourcing, resulting in injury to a worker (Ngoepe, 27 January 2016a, News24).

GIWUSA and OMF in the Tshwane area

As stated earlier, each OMF campaign had its own regional and campus dynamics – something that is missing from the narrative advanced by Luckett and Mzobe (2016) and by Satgar (2016), all of whom focused on the dynamics at Wits. However, in areas like Tshwane, OMF tended to have a union presence, and this is worth investigating, especially in a context where labour scholars bemoan the general decline in the power and influence of trade unions (Buhlungu 2010; Bezuidenhout and Malehoko 2017).

Yster, an organiser for GIWUSA, indicated that although GIWUSA was central in mobilising outsourced workers in the Tshwane area, the union wanted to build a broad, non-sectarian movement involving all those opposed to outsourcing, regardless of their union or political affiliation. The movement was called ‘Outsourcing must Fall’. Yster explained:

I always introduce myself as one of the leaders of ‘Outsourcing Must Fall’ [in the Tshwane area]. We wanted to broaden the campaign and make sure that all workers, political activists from various formations, trade unions, NGOs and individuals who are opposed to outsourcing in the Tshwane area were united. (Yster, 15 August 2016, Tshwane)

Left-wing political activists who had links with GIWUSA founded the OMF in the Tshwane area. Its broad, non-sectarian approach enabled the campaign to build morale among the outsourced workers in Tshwane, supported by students, political activists and trade unions like GIWUSA (Hamilton 2017). When asked why the workers went on unprotected strikes, Moshe, a security guard working for UP, commented:

There was a Fees Must Fall movement. We were in this thing with students. We were also secure. Remember students are clients of the university. GIWUSA, students and Fees Must Fall told us that we’ll be protected. All workers were protected. No worker was dismissed. (Moshe, interview, August 14, 2016)

The role of GIWUSA discussed by Moshe was corroborated by Pri, a female worker at one of the universities in Tshwane: ‘We fought as well because as we were still busy with this issue of payment, they (students) were with us, as well as GIWUSA’ (Pri, interview, Pretoria 14 August 2016).

The role of NEHAWU

When restructuring began in the late 1990s, NEHAWU was opposed to it because, among other things, it included outsourcing cleaning, gardening and other so-called
non-essential service. This would affect the union directly because those workers were part of its constituency. Initially, NEHAWU’s strategy included approaching courts; negotiating with managements of universities; building alliances with workers, academics and working-class communities; commissioning research and organising protests. Despite NEHAWU’s resistance to outsourcing, leadership at universities implemented the outsourcing of services like printing, cleaning, gardening and security (Johnson 2006).

At Wits and in the City of Johannesburg, NEHAWU built alliances with students and community structures to oppose privatisation and outsourcing (Pendlebury and Van der Walt 2006). Similarly, in 1998 at UCT, NEHAWU led a strike against outsourcing, which was crushed by the management and the police (Bardill 2008). In 1999, 20 out of 23 universities outsourced some support services (Van der Walt et al. 2002). For example, the Wits Council endorsed and implemented outsourcing in 2000 in spite of opposition from NEHAWU members (Johnson 2006). Outsourcing had a devastating effect on NEHAWU, especially at institutions of higher education. According to Bardill (2008), blue-collar workers who were members of NEHAWU were retrenched, and NEHAWU closed its offices in some universities (Bardill 2008).

NEHAWU is an affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the biggest trade union federation in South Africa, which is in alliance with the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress, the governing party in South Africa. The alliance to which NEHAWU belongs is often viewed as an obstacle to independent workers’ struggles, as leaders often use their union association as a stepping-stone to well-paid careers in government. For example, both Fikile Majola and Noluthando Mayende-Sibiya were elected national leaders of NEHAWU in the 1990s; they then joined the ANC led-government as members of parliament and in 2014 they became deputy minister and minister respectively (Matuma, 16 May 2014, Mail and Guardian Online).

Since the 1990s, NEHAWU’s participation in struggles against outsourcing had been inconsistent. For example, at UJ, Wits and UCT the union did not participate in solidarity committees along with outsourced workers, academics and students. Some members of the unions who were outsourced workers participated in these committees as individuals but not as representatives of NEHAWU (Buhlungu 2004; Bardill 2008).

The outsourced workers were supposed to have been led by NEHAWU, who also organised workers in the tertiary education institutions. Commentators on OMF have correctly pointed out that because of its association with the ruling ANC, NEHAWU was not able to lead the struggle against outsourcing on campus (Khan 2006; Bardill 2008). In many instances, outsourced workers viewed NEHAWU as close to university managements. At UJ, outsourced workers explicitly opposed NEHAWU by persisting with the unprotected strike, but the union was central to the subsequent signing of the agreement and its members participated in the task-team that discussed the insourcing of workers. Tu, a female worker at UJ, had this to say about the role of NEHAWU: ‘Ey! No! NEHAWU doesn’t take up our issues as we expected them to; even with the issue of insourcing it failed before because of NEHAWU and this is why we don’t like it. … We don’t trust them’ (Tu, interview, 10 October 2017, Johannesburg).

This finding is consistent with the literature on labour studies, which argue that trade unions associated with the ruling party do not always represent the interests of their
members and tend to focus on compromises which do not disturb their relations with
managements and the ruling party (Buhlunlu 2010; Bezuidenhout and Malehoko 2017).

NEHAWU is formally recognised as a union, and despite its inability to lead campaigns
against outsourcing, it managed to sign agreements ending outsourcing at UCT, Wits and
UJ. NEHAWU, students and some academics were members of the task-teams that
oversaw the insourcing process of workers. According to one of the representatives of
NEHAWU at UJ:

… At that time NEHAWU then went to meet with the Vice-Chancellor and some members of
his executive … formally now, that was the first engagement, there was obviously your infor-
mal engagements. So in this meeting with management and NEHAWU there was an agree-
ment that a task-team would be established and the task-team shall conclude its work
within three months (Lunga, Interview, 29 March 2019).

Workers’ victories

With the support of student activists, outsourced university workers who went on unpro-
tected strikes won what could be regarded as major but partial victories in terms of their
wages and conditions of work. On 12 February 2016, Tshwane University of Technology
(TUT) reached an agreement with striking workers which, among other things, promised
to ‘insource workers and increase their basic salary to R5000 per month’ (Ngoepe, News24,
12 February 2016). TUT’s spokesperson, Will de Ruyter, announced: ‘Workers [on Thursday] accepted the Tshwane University of Technology’s agreement on the insourcing of out-
sourced services for a minimum wage of R5 000’ (cited in Ngoepe, News24, 12 February
2016a). Vusi Mahlangu, who spoke on behalf of OMF in the Tshwane area, said: ‘All workers shall earn a minimum wage of R5 000 as a start … and it shall reach R10 000 by the end of 2018. This shall apply to all workers, including those that are not yet fully
insourced’ (cited in Ngoepe, News24, 12 February 2016).

In confirming the victory of OMF in Tshwane, Moshe said:

We were earning about (R) 3000. Yes. It was a R3000 basic salary. We had cleaners [who] were
earning (R) 2 600, (R) 2400. … So the agreement was we were going to have a (R) 5 500 per
month and we’ll be earning R10 000 per month in 2018. R10 000 is what you are supposed
to take home, and that is after all deductions. (Moshe Moshwana, interview, August 14, 2016)

UCT insourced about 7000 workers, so cleaners and gardeners who had formerly earned
R3 000 now earned R7 500 a month (Petersen 2016). The University of South Africa (UNISA)
followed suit, signing an agreement to insource workers from June 2016 (Kekana, 25

Besides undertakings to insource workers and increase wages, in close to 100% of
instances it was agreed that workers’ children who qualified academically could study
at the universities free of charge. This was a benefit, which had always been enjoyed by
permanently employed staff members (Macube 29 June 2016, Sowetan).

According to Table 1, the wage increases for outsourced workers at the universities
ranged from R1 000 to R5 800. The increases were historic and significant since they
ranged from 27.8% to 290%.

Although considerable progress had been made regarding the insourcing of workers,
there were some concerns. Universities complained that insourcing was expensive, so
some relief and catering workers were not insourced (Fengu, 23 January 2019, City
Press). According to the Universities South Africa (USAf) (2016), a university with 21,000 full-time students, 1040 research and teaching staff and 830 contractors or service providers might pay R10 000 per outsourced worker per month to a contractor. However, a worker only received the R3 500 and R4 000 per month. This meant that it was cheaper to hire workers directly, rather than through an intermediary.

### Conclusion

Before 2015, workers maintained the struggle against outsourcing using strategies such as open protests, unprotected strikes, submitting memoranda to authorities and building solidarity with students and academics. However, it was the student movements called OMF and FMF, which shifted power in favour of the outsourced workers. There is no doubt that the entry of large numbers of students into the campaign against outsourcing delivered significant wage increases and brought about the fundamental transformation of employment relations on many campuses. Solidarity was not just between workers and students: NGOs and socialist groupings, as well as the student organisations to which some of the student leaders of FMF belonged also played a key role in supporting the OMF campaign. One of the key lessons of this research is that events like FMF may have a ‘spillover’ effect and may favourably affect other existing struggles, such as the campaign against outsourcing, which had dragged on for close to twenty-five years.

There is no doubt that the success of the OMF campaign had far-reaching implications, especially for black women, who tended to perform most of the precarious forms of work. Wage increases for single parents meant they were better able to support themselves and their families. However, they were also subjected to the rising costs of living, electricity tariff increases, expensive transport costs and inadequate access to water, sanitation, housing and health care. The fact that state funding for the universities has been declining since the early 1990s means that the ability of the universities to sustain insourcing is seriously challenged. Perhaps, in the medium and long term, it is necessary to campaign for the state to increase university funding so that higher education becomes a public good that plays a role in promoting social and economic justice on campuses and in society as a whole.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
Funding
This work was supported by Department of Science and Technology, Republic of South Africa [grant number TTK190227421295].

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**Interviews**

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