

HOT TOPIC: Transformation at universities

All groups consulted on insourcing

It is an open secret that last year's #FeesMustFall movement has turned South Africa's higher education sector on its head, foregrounding the funding crunch and highlighting numerous transformation deficiencies that had accumulated due to years of being swept under the proverbial carpet. Apart from the student fees issue and the need to transform the curriculum, the uprisings laid bare the exploitative nature of the outsourcing of service workers, prompting universities to do the morally ethical thing and permanently absorb the men and women working on their campuses daily.

With no gun held to any of the decisionmakers' heads, the NMMU council, in response to demands made by students in November last year, resolved to end outsourcing of service workers. The institution duly began the process of insourcing service functions late last year, which was to see the catering services function and workers absorbed at the university on April 1 this year.

Council also resolved as an act of goodwill to top up the workers' low wages, thereby bringing all to a minimum across the board of R5 000 monthly cost to company package, which took effect from December 1 and will continue until the conclusion of the insourcing process. Study benefits were immediately extended to workers of outsourced service functions as well as granting them access to campus health facilities.



Council directed the university management to work with representatives of organised labour, students and workers employed in outsourced companies at NMMU towards insourcing contracts of service workers. A total of 264 (225 in Port Elizabeth, 39 in George) protection services (security) workers were given employment offers and from July 1 are in the NMMU's permanent employ.

In the process of absorbing the service functions, NMMU management has been in

continuous engagement with workers through various task teams and working groups that comprise management, organised labour, worker and student representatives.

The article, "NMMU staff on 'go-slow' over pay" (August 29), which claims that the university "renege[d] on wage agreements and other commitments raised in the wake of last year's #FeesMustFall student campaign", besides misrepresenting facts, failed to articulate and contextualise the funding and financial precipices

the higher education sector is heading to unless drastic and urgent innovative measures are implemented.

It was with these pressures in mind that the university initially offered workers a fixed term contract for 12 months. This was to allow for the reintegrated service function business models to be reviewed to render these more effective and cost efficient, and thereby contribute to the university's long-term sustainability.

When this was rejected the

university offered workers permanency of employment, initial packages that did not make them worse off, plus limited benefits, and committed to completing the remodelling of the business of service functions by the end of the year.

The benefit of this approach, in addition to helping to place the university on a more sustainable footing, will enable posts of service workers to be appropriately graded, thus enabling improved remuneration, enhancing

opportunities for focused and skill-orientated training and development, promotion opportunities and job mobility. The remodelling of the service functions is critical not only for the sustainability of the university but for contributing to structurally changing the lives of the working class.

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) chairwoman Lynette Roodt's media commentary is perturbing, to say to the least, given the gravity of the funding and financial challenges the sector and NMMU is facing. Her commentary is perturbing for the following additional reasons:

- NMMU has been very deliberate in, and committed to working with workers, unions and students in implementing council's debt relief and reintegration of outsourced services resolutions through multi-stakeholder task teams;

- These processes offer opportunities not only to co-create a new sustainable future, but to work through the issues until agreements are reached and

- When the process is exhausted without reaching consensus, mediation and arbitration mechanisms are available as recourse.

It is difficult to understand how and why Roodt can opt to take a route and position that can only lead to more hardship for the university and workers.

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WORKERS PROTEST: Insourced NMMU staff affiliated to Nehawu handed a list of demands to acting NMMU vice-chancellor Dr Sibongile Muthwa at a campus protest

Picture: EUGENE COETZEE