

## NEWS & COMMENT

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### *The strike and academic freedom at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2006*

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On Thursday, 2 February 2006, the four Unions at UKZN (COMSA, NEHAWU, NTESU and UNSU) served notice on the University Management that they would embark upon strike action beginning Monday, 6 February 2006. Staff had been given a 4 percent increase while the University management, in addition to a 4 percent increase for 2006, had been given bonuses of up to 12 percent of their salary packages. Beyond the immediate disparity in salaries and conditions, staff were angered by the 'autocratic management style' of the senior university administration. In the salary review process, the management committee broke with the ritual of bargaining. Presumably on the grounds of efficiency, they simply told everyone what they were getting – no negotiations. For twelve days, beginning with the poorest workers, the strike gathered steam.

The strike was timed with registration week, and it was uncertain that academics loyal to students would strike during this period. The unresponsiveness of the university executive from day one, however, proved to be the strike's biggest asset. Those who were initially diffident soon downed their pens. The vice-chancellor's pretence that registration was continuing as normal unravelled and it became apparent that teaching could not start as scheduled at the start of week two. Support continued to snowball. It seems that the strike had touched a nerve. Staff were run down and demotivated by the effects of a merger between the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal to create the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Tectonic forces were forcing departments together and in many cases moving them across town. The various forced removals of the university merger, despite cascades of promotional material and rebranding, had failed to produce a robust camaraderie among staff. It was the strike, incredibly, which achieved this. The strike had an electrifying effect on staff who, for the first time, came together across race, class, and employment category, as never before in institutional memory.

Admittedly, the burdens of the strike fell hardest on the poorest, and academic staff were among the last to head to the picket lines. As Helen Poonen, an administrator at the UKZN's Centre for Civil Society, observed:

Credit must be given to the staff and union reps who were with us on the buses every single day. Who stood in the sun and rain with hunger pangs 'cause we did not take our lunch along compared to those who were financially able to buy food from the university's tuck shops. Here, I noticed the difference in status in that the cleaners and admin clerks could not afford to buy food everyday from the vendors, yet the academic and senior administration staff were able to do so. If a few agreed to the 2 percent that management first proposed, the staff that would suffer most would be the cleaners and clerical staff who are on the lowest wage scale. They are the brave warriors who proudly stood in the front of all our protests dancing and singing praise songs.

Nonetheless, by the end of the first week the management, correctly, sensed that staff were solidly behind the strike. In a bald attempt at intimidation, the management committee sent word through the deans that 'line managers' were to take a register of staff, and any found deserting their posts would find their salary docked accordingly. Ari Sitas, Director in the programme of Industrial, Organisational and Labour Studies and Head of School of Sociology and Social Studies responded thus to instructions from the Dean:

I am not a 'line manager', I am a Head of School. I am heading or leading a large number of free South Africans and free professionals who are exercising their legal right to embark on an industrial action, according to their conscience. Furthermore, I am a trade union member and have exercised my democratic right as well. I am there, as democracy implies, as a participant in the current stand-off and present on the campus throughout its duration. Therefore your instruction to take a register is an insult to my dignity, as a head of school, as an academic, as a manager and as a citizen of post-Apartheid South Africa.

The university's public relations director, Dasarath Chetty, moved to staunch the support for the strike, through a combination of spin and suppression. Dissent within the university was successfully shielded from the Fourth Estate, and for three days newspapers refrained from printing anything about the strike. It became clear, however, that word was getting out. Two days into the strike, staff received the following instructions from the office of Public Affairs and Corporate Communications:

Public Affairs and Corporate Communications would like to request that all staff who receive any media query related to the impending industrial action refer these calls to Jennene Singh ... or Bhekani Dlamini ... We appreciate your assistance in this regard.

Professor Dasarath Chetty  
Executive Director

Like *Fight Club*, the number one rule about the strike, apparently, was that one didn't talk about it. Jimi Adesina, chair of sociology at Rhodes University wrote a lacerating response, which included this observation:

I have before me a copy of the ban order that the Government of the Republic of Transkei issued against Clarence Mlamli Makwetu on 7 December 1976; it carried the signature of K.W. Matanzima. C. M. Makwetu was asked by Matanzima to 'immediately withdraws (sic) together with your wife, children and household effects from the said area in the said district [Tembuland] and proceed to NYANDENI AREA ... And there to take up residence at a place to be pointed to you by the Magistrate, Libode'. All nice and orderly, isn't it?

‘Proceed’, ‘take up residence’, etc. K.W. Matanzima could argue that he never used the word ‘ban’ or ‘restriction’, as I suspect you would argue that your e-mail to the staff of UKZN never used the word ‘gag’ or said that UKZN staff could face disciplinary action if they flout your instruction. You could argue that it is an ‘injunction’, an ‘advice’ not an order or even an instruction. But Matanzima fooled no one; neither will you...

Adesina’s support for the strike, and for the freedom of expression issues raised through it, were echoed by a range of organisations and individuals, including the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa, and the Institute for Academic Freedom, based in Nigeria.

Concerns over academic freedom and freedom of expression remain. Ashwin Desai, an academic at the Centre for Civil Society and noted critic of government policy has had his honorary research fellowship revoked and the vice-chancellor also instructed a selection committee not to consider his candidature for a position at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Despite a campaign for his reinstatement, his banning remains unresolved. Dasarath Chetty himself has shown little tolerance for criticism, and has filed suit for defamation against Jimi Adesina for the text printed above.