

Opening doors of learning to workers

BY JUDI MADUMO AND DINGA SIKWEBU

In April and June, a group of Numsa worker leaders caused a stir at the University of the Witwatersrand as they walked around corridors of the university in their colourful union t-shirts and caps. A worker at the university cafeteria who could not contain her curiosity asked one of the Numsa members whether a union conference was being held at the university. She was surprised to hear the answer. They said that they were students at the institution. Clearly, the cafeteria worker could not imagine active unionists being university students at the same time.

Eighteen Numsa worker leaders are registered with the university and are doing a sociology department certificate course in social theory and research. They were on campus in April and June as part of four week-long block-releases from

work. The course is part of the union's campaign to make university education accessible to workers.

Numsa's 8th national congress in 2008 decided that the union should actively devise ways to open the doors of institutions of higher learning and ensure that workers have access to university education. Since then, the union's education department has been negotiating with various universities to implement the congress resolution. The Wits certificate course is the fruit of these negotiations.

The course, equivalent to a first-year sociology module, started last year and 13 comrades graduated at the end of the year. Seven of these union members are registered for bachelors' degrees at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Wits and Unisa. "This certificate empowers us to advance the struggle of the working class. It enlightens us on contradictions that exist within capitalist society," said one of this year's students, Western Cape treasurer Vuyo Lufele. The course helps in heightening participants' understanding of how capitalism works, a sentiment that was echoed by other participants. "Most of us were not aware of environ-



Class of 2010: Worker leaders doing a certificate course in social theory and research with the sociology department at Wits University.

mental and ecological issues," said Ekurhuleni treasurer Gabriel Kheswa. "After the course we will not only concentrate on production-related issues but also environmental issues."

While this year's intake is happy with the political nature of the course, some students in the group are still uncertain about how the course will equip them to deal with shopfloor issues.

"To be honest the course is brilliant

for worker leaders. The only issue is that what we have done up to now has not focused on an analysis of the shopfloor," says participant and Springs local secretary Leepile Khumalo. The Isipingo local secretary and national deputy secretary of the Numsa national youth desk, Khonzeni Mkhize, has a similar view. "The course is beneficial except that it should accommodate crisis in companies," Mkhize said.

Certificate in social theory and research

- Block 1:** Debates on working class strategies
- Block 2:** How capitalism works
- Block 3:** Global capitalism
- Block 4:** Alternatives to capitalism