Stellenbosch chaos as workers strike

HENRIETTE GELDENHUYYS

STELLENBOSCH University students begged doormen to allow them into the Neelies student centre yesterday, where all entrances were locked after workers trashed parts of the building and turned over dustbins.

Scores of security guards dressed in riot gear and carrying glass shields stood in front of the entrances to many campus buildings.

Although police vans and police armoured vehicles patrolled the campus streets, their presence was not nearly as strong as during the #FeesMustFall protests at the end of last year.

The three-storey student centre, which hosts banks, fast food shops, coffee shops, a supermarket, the SRC, the radio station Matie FM and student newspaper Die Matie, was closed from 10.30am after the workers’ protest.

The workers, who have been on strike since Wednesday, demanded permanent employment by the university so they could earn more and get benefits, including medical aid and pension.

They are employed by an independent company subcontracted by the university.

Strikers are also suspected of committing arson which gutted one of the basement offices in the administration building on Thursday night, according to university spokesman Martin Viljoen.

Stellenbosch police are investigating charges of arson and malicious damage to property Viljoen said, adding that a student’s car was also set alight.

One student, who gave her name only as Danielle, could be seen knocking on the Neelies doors yesterday and pleading to be allowed in to draw money she said she needed for food.

She eventually burst into tears.

“I don’t have time for this. I’m writing a final exam tomorrow,” she said.

Across the road from the administration building, Die Woordfees, one of the biggest events in the town, went on undisturbed.

The roads leading to its various events were, however, blocked by traffic police.

A representative of a sponsor of the festival, Shalani van Niekerk, gave away 120 bags of free popcorn outside Die Neelies to hungry students.

“The students were hungry, irritated and scared. ‘It’s very sad. They (the workers) have the right to say what they want, but if the students are afraid, it’s a bit bad,” she said.

One striker, a cleaner with two small children who did not want to be named, said he worked eight hours a day earned R2 300 a month, and had no pension or medical aid.

He said cleaners who were permanently employed by the university “earn at least double”, plus benefits.

Vice-chancellor Professor Wim de Villiers condemned those who damaged property.

henrietteg34@gmail.com