

Despotism or Democracy at Wits University?

The fight for a 'Workers' and Peoples' University' in a new South Africa in 2001

Lucien van der Walt

17 May 2001

Contents

WHOSE COUNCIL?	3
COUNCIL AND THE RULING CLASS	4
WORKER REPRESENTATIVES?	4
INTERNAL REPRESENTATIVES	5
STUDENTS?	6
WITS 2001	6
REBELLING AGAINST WITS 2001	7
REPRESSION	8
RETRENCHMENTS	8
“SET” AND THE MARKET	8
MARKETISATION: THE “MARKET UNIVERSITY”	9
NEW ARCHITECTURE OF POWER	9
NORMA REID: SAME SUIT, DIFFERENT YEAR	10
WITS 2001 CONTINUA?	10
A WORKERS’ AND PEOPLES’ UNIVERSITY?	11
ALTERNATIVES	12
STRATEGIC LINE	12

NOTE: the author was not a member of Keep Left. He spoke as an invited guest, in his capacity as an activist in the 1999–2001 struggle against privatisation and outsourcing; the talk is from the perspectives of the anarchist/ syndicalist tradition.

SO, THE University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) has just selected a new Vice Chancellor (VC), Norma Reid. Reid promised, in her public address for the VC post, that her concern would be to deal with the “challenges of chronic disadvantage, oppression and poverty,” and to preserve liberty at the institution.

This is very predictable. After all, who would apply for the Wits post on an openly neo-liberal agenda?

Every member of the ruling class cries crocodile tears for the poor. When Trevor Manuel of the ruling ANC (African National Congress) cuts spending on basic services like health and education in the yearly Budget, he calls this a “People’s Budget.” When Tony Leon of the DA (Democratic Alliance) pledges that his party will put in place a 12-month programme for privatisation, if elected, he too, describes this as a favour to the working class. For Tony, this will lead to job creation and prosperity.

So look beyond the rhetoric. There are two key issues to examine.

One, how was the new Wits Vice Chancellor (VC) selected? Two, how will the new VC address the crucial issue, the privatisation of Wits?

WHOSE COUNCIL?

To understand the selection, and the role of the Wits VC, we must understand that Wits is a fundamentally undemocratic institution.

It is governed, in the final instance, by a Council. According to the Higher Education Act of 1996, university councils must have 60% representation from outside “stakeholders,” and 40% from university constituencies.

Historically the Wits council was dominated by big business, especially the mining and finance houses, in collusion with Wits’ senior management. Post-apartheid, there has been more concern to include other groups, but fundamentally Council remains dominated by representatives from big business, representatives from the state, and Wits’ senior management.

The State has representatives from three levels: city, province and national, there to keep an eye on matters. State control is also ensured outside of Council by the simple fact that the state provides the main income to the university besides student fees. Business also has a large number of representatives, including representatives of capitalist “donors,” and business appointees by the Council.

In short, Council is pretty much structured like everything in this society: it is ruled by the tiny economic and political elite –the *ruling class* to be quite blunt – and by and for that class.

COUNCIL AND THE RULING CLASS

Obviously, we can and should expect big business, the private capitalists, to pursue an agenda of using Wits for their own ends. And the same goes for the state: no friend of the working class, the state elite of politicians, generals and directors is allied to the capitalists.

Between these two wings of the ruling class – (private) capitalists and (state) managers – there is a deep alliance. One aims to accumulate capital, the other, land and people. And their basic interests coincide: each needs the other.

A core part of this alliance – at the current moment – is a programme of privatisation and commercialisation and of cuts in spending on social services, codified in the neo-liberal GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy) programme.

This is not a pro-worker state by any stretch of the imagination, nor can such a thing exist. Ours is neo-liberal, and capitalist, and nationalist, through and through, just like the ruling ANC.

Just look at its programme for universities: GEAR explicitly calls for “reductions in subsidisation” to higher education and “greater private sector involvement” in the sector, whilst the 1997 National Commission on Higher Education endorsed “applied” education plus networking the universities with business and government.

So, we can expect a basically pro-capitalist and pro-state outlook from both the private sector elite and the state sector elite, as they work together to run Wits through Council, through funding and through control over educational policy.

WORKER REPRESENTATIVES?

In keeping with post-apartheid sensitivities, there are also outside representatives from the trade unions and from something called “the community.”

But not very many!

Organised labour gets one (!) seat through a nomination from the corporatist National Education, Development and Labour Unit (NEDLAC). In effect, this means unions (from outside Wits) get 1 whole seat, despite representing millions and millions of people.

With selection by NEDLAC, it is almost a foregone conclusion that the union representative will be a full-time union leader, deeply enmeshed into the new state and closely tied to the ANC and the new political elite.

James Motlatsi of the National Union of Mineworkers (the NUM) was the labour representative until late last year, when he stood down. Where was he going? He was going to direct the NUM’s investment company.

This company is involved in shady, anti-worker deals, including involvement in union-bashing outsourcing companies. This includes involvement in Fedics – which has bid for Wits outsourcing contracts. Ordinary NUM members have no control over this company; they would be appalled to know what it does – which is why its shady operations are kept shady.

“Community” representation seems to be drawn from the SA National Civics Organisation (SANCO), a legacy of the 1980s and 1990s “civics,” or township organisations.

But SANCO body is in deep crisis. SANCO’s leadership is closely tied to the ANC, and has increasingly been drawn into ANC projects to discipline the townships. The most notorious

example is involvement in the “Masakhane” campaign, which was essentially meant to force people to pay for basic services in the townships.

The more drawn into these programmes SANCO has become, the more SANCO has entered into a crisis as a genuine township-based activists movement.

Now, there is nothing wrong, as such, with people paying for services. But there is a big problem when you make poor people pay higher rates than rich people, when you charge the poor higher rates than under apartheid, and when you do this as part of GEAR’s larger attack on the working class.

And SANCO getting involved in this sort of neo-liberal cost recovery exercise through “Masakhane” has widely discredited its structures and leadership.

Meanwhile, SANCO has developed large investment company; many of its stalwarts from the 1980s, such as Moss Mayekiso, sit on this capitalist company’s Board. The SANCO company is mired in controversies around spending and corruption. It has also reportedly been involved in tendering for privatised state assets.

The more SANCO has drifted into cost recovery and into investments, the more it has lost its social base. This is one basic reason why SANCO is largely and strikingly absent in the new wave of township community activism. The new movements we see coming together in formations like the new Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) are largely outside of SANCO. Indeed, they have emerged precisely into the vacuum created by SANCO’s disintegration as a real “civics” movement.

Therefore, we cannot see SANCO as a reliable ally in the Council. And since new structures like APF are not really part of the NEDLAC system, they are unlikely to oust SANCO from Council.

INTERNAL REPRESENTATIVES

The internal (or Wits) representatives on the Council are a mixed bunch.

Many are rooted in the unelected management structures at Wits.

Real power at Wits, in the day to day, lies in senior, largely unaccountable, full-time management – what Wits increasingly calls its Senior Executive Team (SET). SET is comprised of the VC, the Deputy VCs and some sort of Human Resources representative.

At least three members of the SET, including the VC, sit on Council, along with another senior manager, such as the University Registrar. None of these are elected, or under any real mandate from any popular constituency including the academics themselves.

Next up are the Deans, the heads of Faculties. Deans were, at one stage, elected; this has fallen away, and with the Wits 2001 restructuring, Deans are now becoming “executive” Deans. This means that rather than being elected by academic staff, they are *appointed* managers, allied to the central management of the university. In practice, the executive Deans are drawn into SET work, as are various other full-time senior managers.

The Deans elect a representative from among themselves, usually a Dean, to Council.

Then, the Senate has some representation, perhaps four representatives. Senate is about as close to a representative body as exists on this campus. The original aim of university Senates everywhere was to vest controlling power in the academic staff: they were the expert workers who knew what the institution required, and who could judge what the institution should do, in best pursuit of its goals of producing and disseminating knowledge.

But one major problem is that Professors are only a *minority* of academic staff these days. Another problem is that there are *no real mechanisms* to keep the Professors on Senate accountable to – even in a dialogue with – members of their academic departments, and other academics, regarding Senate debates and decisions.

Where does the rest of the staff, the majority of the staff, fit into Council? They get to elect one (!) representative to Council from academic staff and one (!) representative to Council from support staff. Bear in mind that academics are only one section of the total university staff, often not quite a majority; the university also includes administrators at all levels, including service workers; also technicians, manual workers, cleaners, librarians, IT staff etc.

STUDENTS?

Next up: the students. The students have two: one from the SRC (Student Representative Council, for undergraduates) and one from the PGA (Postgraduate Association); they are not from student activist structures such as SASCO (the SA Students Congress).

If the SRC or PGA is rightwing, then its voice becomes silent on crucial issues. But that voice is never very loud; big business and big government are not going to take seriously opposition from 2 young students.

In any case, these union and student representatives are a minority, and are regularly overridden.

In short, most academics, most campus workers, and most students have no real say in the Council.

And last, even if this situation was different, there is another additional problem, which is being reinforced by the Wits 2001 restructuring: a trend for Senate to become every more **sidelined** by Senate sub-committees, by SET and by Council, for Senate to become a rubber stamp.

There is no way around this basic point: the VC and the SET are basically part of the ruling class; to this we can add Wits' executive Deans. Wits University is a state university, and its senior management are state managers, part of the state manager wing of the ruling class. Second, the Council system is an additional means through which the ruling class governs Wits University. Senate is not part of the ruling class, representing primarily senior academics, and while it has some power – in real terms, its power has been eroded.

WITS 2001

The outcomes of this situation were shown dramatically last year. At a special Council meeting on the 24 February 2000, Council voted in a special meeting to retrench 613 workers and to outsource cleaning, catering, grounds and maintenance.

This was despite opposition from the largest campus union, the union that represents the affected workers: the 700-strong National, Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU). This was despite opposition from the SRC. It was despite opposition from the PGA [the PGA was very radical at this time, and included one anarchist comrade – more on anarchists/syndicalists at Wits here – LvdW]. It was despite opposition by a section of Senate. It was despite opposition by numerous academic staff, including the Concerned Academics Groups, and

a petition by hundreds. It was despite national and global condemnation of the Wits 2001 plan, including by trade unions, academic associations and dozens of others.

Wits 2001 was and is part of a larger attempt to privatise and commercialise Wits University, transforming it from a public institution to a University whose teaching and research was driven by the needs of big business and central government, rather than the working class majority in this country.

The plan, titled “Wits 2001,” was the University equivalent of the “iGoli 2002” plan to privatise and corporatise greater Johannesburg.

Wits is, according to its strategic plan, is explicitly committed to becoming an “entrepreneurial university” using “intellectual capital” to generate third-stream “income.” [more here]

Worker retrenchments are used to fund this process, and are also used to break the unions that make Wits “unattractive” to rich kids – and that can defy management. Let us not forget that NEHAWU was absolutely central to fights against apartheid on campus, and apartheid in the larger society.

Activists from the 1990s student protests at Wits will remember that many “student” marches were predominantly comprised of *NEHAWU workers*, and that workers waged heroic campaigns, including sleep-ins and occupations, at this institution. [For video of such protests in the 1990s, see here and here).

Breaking NEHAWU is not just about money; it’s about fundamentally shifting the balance of power on campus away from the black working class majority, in favour of the elite, white and now also increasingly, black.

REBELLING AGAINST WITS 2001

Although the students and support service workers representative and the labour representative opposed the Wits 2001 plan in Council, it went ahead anyway.

In fact, NEHAWU at Wits has to date still not made any written agreement with Wits in which it acceded to the retrenchments. The matter is going to the Labour Court. But this did not stop Wits, which used the muscle of the business/ state / SET bloc to override objections.

Hundreds of protestors, events like a “retrenchment vigil,” occupations, opposition from students and workers, and widespread local and international condemnation of the plan, were all ignored. Much of this was done through the Wits 2001 Crisis Committee, of which I was an active member. [The W2CC merged mid-2000 into the APF – LvdW]

Efforts by academics opposed to Wits 2001, centred on a Concerned Academics Group – which worked with NEHAWU, and of which I was a founder member – were also ignored.

A detailed and rigorous Concerned Academics Group report, which showed that outsourcing would devastate jobs and worsen services on campus, eventually came to the attention of Council and Senate; it was shot down. [The report used to be at the COSATU website; it is now hosted here).

Crucially, that report also showed that the architects of Wits 2001’s claim that the plan was developed through “consultation” with all “stake-holders” was a myth: labour, students and many academics were simply ignored; it’s all there in the minutes, how proposals for worker-driven and worker-friendly restructuring were ignored, and how neo-liberal outsourcing was rammed through.

REPRESSION

And when students and trade unionists began to protest against their exclusion, management invoked the courts and started to interdict organisations and individuals prominent in the protests. It also started to put pressure on individual activists.

14 named individuals, as well as SASCO, the SRC, the PGA and NEHAWU were all cited in the application for interdicts following a series of protests in 2000. The aim was to make it a criminal offence to picket without permission, to in any way disrupt the university, and to make too much noise, and to enforce this with the police.

At least 2 academic activists were called in by heads of department, and warned that senior management, that is SET, was investigating disciplinary actions against them.

I was 1 of those two people, and I can tell you this: it was clear what was going on.

RETRENCHMENTS

So, at the end of June last year, June 2000, 613 workers lost their jobs. The workers were given no say in this! The affected departments – cleaning, catering, maintenance and grounds – were closed, and new outsourcing companies brought in, such as Supercare and Fedics. These new companies are, to be blunt, low-wage union bashers. They can dispute this, if they like, but the record is quite plain.

Let's take an example: what this means for workers at Wits. An average wage for a Wits staff member in the Senate House canteen was around R2,200 (sometimes higher due to seniority) prior to the outsourcing – and this in addition to access medical aid benefits, loan schemes, and the right of workers' children to attend Wits for free.

This is gone now. Fedics cut wages for these canteen workers to R1,100 last year, and the new company, *La Dulce*, is reportedly cutting them to R1,000 this time around. And there are *no* benefits at all. **So, half the wages and none of the benefits: thus, the new Wits!**

So even if you got reemployed – and according to Wits management, only 300 Wits workers even got jobs in the new companies – this is at half the old wage, but with none of the additional benefits, and with zero union representation. NEHAWU has been gutted, and workers, having built a union for years, must start anew.

These companies, which employ about half the Wits support staff, are totally undemocratic, are run on a strict disciplinary code and with ruthless supervisors, and this has led to a second wave of retrenchments at Wits as *re-employed* Wits workers get flushed out by the new companies.

“SET” AND THE MARKET

This is not a democratic university! It is run by and for the ruling class, through SET and Council. The wills of students (20,000+ people), workers and academics (2,000+ people) were overridden and silenced.

And things are becoming even more undemocratic. Traditionally, Wits was governed by old-style academic structures in which academics were represented – although in a problematic way – at Faculty and University level through the Senate.

I say this is problematic because (as noted earlier) most academic representatives operated without mandates and report backs.

Still, there was an element of democracy and self-management, however warped by the Professor/ non-Professor divide, however limited by the growing bureaucracy, however limited by the SET and the Council. And within the departments as well, academics had a substantial say over course materials, hours and other crucial matters.

The service worker retrenchments last year were only part of Wits 2001. The other part, as I mentioned, was to commercialise university teaching and research. This has concrete implications for university governance.

Fundamentally, it represents an assault on the last vestiges of worker self-management by academic staff, and a strict alignment of the academic job to the needs and goals of the ruling class.

MARKETISATION: THE “MARKET UNIVERSITY”

Cross-subsidisation between profitable Faculties like Commerce and Law (and the Arts/ humanities) is being phased out, and so Faculties like the Arts/ humanities are being forced to become self-sufficient (this is “cost-centring”, in the neo-liberal jargon) and to raise more and more of their own income. Departments are being merged into schools, and the number of Faculties is being reduced.

What does this mean? In part it means that academic workloads are growing rapidly. It *also* means that job security is tied directly to student numbers. So, less profitable courses are phased out or closed down, and the market makes the decisions about which courses to teach at departmental level.

But there is more to it than this: the pressure is on to generate what is called “third stream” income. Stream one is the State subsidy to the universities. This has been cut since the 1980s, in line with neo-liberal policies. GEAR, as noted, exemplifies this trend. Stream two is student fees. As stream one declines, stream two becomes more important i.e. student fees keep rising. At the same time, stream one and stream two are not enough: outsourcing of service staff plus the restructuring of academic work take place to cut costs and reduce resistance.

But what is called stream three – “third stream” – income becomes more important. This means money from other “third” sources.

Which sources? As we saw, it’s quite clear: it means “greater private sector involvement,” “applied” education, and an “entrepreneurial university” selling “intellectual capital.”

In short: doing research and training at the behest of capital and the state. Dropping enquiry-driven science to chase private contracts. Dropping formative and critical education, to provide vocational training. In this world, crudely, it becomes more important to get a contract producing a good anti-dandruff shampoo for private companies, than to bother with critical social theory, or “blue sky” natural science work.

NEW ARCHITECTURE OF POWER

This is the background against which, during the first phase of Wits 2001 restructuring in 1999–2000, new structures were put in place which undermine even the limited representation of workers, students and academics in Council, Senate and at Faculty.

At the top is the now-formalised SET, including as labour advisor, Richard De Villiers, a former mine manager. Replacing Senate, in practice, is a new Academic Restructuring Review Committee, which makes sure that the University, overall, is in line with the Wits 2001 agenda. At each Faculty, an Academic Planning and Review Committee also coordinate activities with the Wits 2001 plan.

Now that Faculties have been merged, the new executive Deans are being appointed to manage in the university, a place for science and culture and knowledge, in the traditional money-grabbing top-down private sector (and state sector) style, and with private sector-matched wages that have currently been proposed at R500,000 a year – well above what even senior Professors earn.

Meanwhile, the academics are now being evaluated through a new performance appraisal system in which “income generation” – usually meaning contract research work that generates money for Wits – plays a central role in setting wage increases.

NORMA REID: SAME SUIT, DIFFERENT YEAR

This is the sort of structure and institution that appointed the new VC.

Wits procedures for appointing a VC state “the selection process must be responsive to the needs of the entire University community” and follow an “open and transparent process.”

However, Wits’ structure as a whole is undemocratic, and this is reflected in the actual selection process which marginalises “the entire University community” and is anything but an “open and transparent process.”

A Selection Committee was set up, comprising 20 people, of whom students were 3, academics below professorial level 2, and support staff 2. Moreover, even while this Committee makes the basic decision, but Council retains a veto i.e. makes the final decision.

Yet even if the process were totally open (for example, to elections) it would not help. Wits is a pyramid of power, with the VC as the pharaoh. An elected dictator is a dictator nonetheless. Wits mirrors the larger class division in society; choosing your capitalist is not the same as getting rid of capitalism; **choosing the VC is not the same as a democratic Workers’ and Peoples’ university, since it is simply about choosing which member of the ruling class will rule ... and this through a closely controlled and not really democratic process.**

The very existence of a VC is testament to an undemocratic structure that centralises power in the hands of management. The VC is only the tip of the undemocratic iceberg; naturally he or she will receive appropriate ruling class privileges, viz., a mansion, R60 000 a month, a car, perks etc, to match the power.

WITS 2001 CONTINUA?

But what then of Norma Reid’s own views? Not only did she fail to mention Wits 2001 in her presentation (for the VC position), but also her own comments suggest a strong neo-liberal orientation on her part. While Reid spoke in her presentation for the job of the need maintain the “independence of the university from commercial and political and economic interests,” she went on to state that

...this should not stop us from working with the business and commercial sectors in mutually advantageous schemes for wealth creation, commercial exploitation of intellectual property, and creating employment and prosperity in our city, region, country and the wider continent. (These developments) have been stunningly successful in British universities.

Further,

We must maintain and enhance Wits' excellent research record – by providing high quality support to researchers in applying for funding, encouraging the private sector to invest in our world-class research, and in that which is industrially and commercially valuable and relevant, supporting our new research staff in developing the skills to survive in a cut-throat world.

In short, the new VC promises, in practice, nothing but more of the same:

- The outsourcing will continue;
- Academic work will continue to be commercialised in the drive to be “industrially and commercially valuable and relevant”;
- Cost-recovery against poor students – for example, in the form of upfront fee payments-will continue, in this “cut-throat world”;

A WORKERS' AND PEOPLES' UNIVERSITY?

The issue is not whether to transform Wits. The old Wits, racially exclusive, anti-union, and bureaucratic, was always in need of transformation.

However, the question that must be asked is “in whose CLASS interests is transformation taking place?”

Wits 2001 is certainly a form of transformation. It is neo-liberal transformation in the interests of the capitalist and state manager class i.e. the ruling class, it is part of the commodification and militarization of science itself as the bourgeoisie sheds even its nominal commitment to the Enlightenment pursuit of knowledge.

The industrial relations system on campus is being radically overhauled through the implementation of support service outsourcing.

The projected savings from this measure have not yet been realised: while estimated savings were projected to be nearly R50 million over five years, the severance packages for the 613 casualties of neo-liberal restructuring have wiped most of these savings out.

However, the implementation of outsourcing has fundamentally changed the balance of class forces on campus.

The militant local NEHAWU branch lost nearly 400 members through the retrenchments, and 3 shop stewards, and a great deal of confidence and credibility. *Neo-liberalism is not just about cash savings, but also about the reassertion of capitalist and state manager power against the labour movement.*

Research and education are being subjected to the market and to the state on a scale unprecedented, as so-called “applied”/ “mode 2” research takes priority over critical intellectual enquiry. The uncertainty created by the restructuring for many academics, and the opportunities it creates for a select few, have demobilised academics as a strong constituency on campus. Academics as a whole have no voice on campus.

Tougher cost recovery, and an orientation by the University towards “fee-paying” students means, in practice, a purge of mainly- black, working class, youth who cannot afford to meet the new, increasingly upfront / pay-in-advance fees payment structure.

Hence, the implementation of “class apartheid” and the perpetuation of the national oppression of the black, Coloured and Indian working class, at Wits is part and parcel of Wits 2001.

ALTERNATIVES

What would an alternative university look like, what would be an alternative programme for transformation?

It should be a programme for the democratic governance of Wits, and for the reorientation of Wits from big business and the state, to an institution run by, for and in the interests of, the working class majority.

What we need to do is to struggle to replace the structure we have with a democratic structure in which power resides with the majority of the university community, support staff, teaching staff, researchers, and students, in consultation with the broad working class.

This sort of Workers’ and Peoples’ University would be responsive to *our* needs, as the working class, – not those of the economic and political elite. It would be aimed, fundamentally, at social transformation in the interests of the working class against capitalism and the state.

Absolutely central to that project is a defence of science and the scientific project, including of “blue sky” research, against the short-term focus and elitist interests of the ruling class. It means defending and extending the universal and global heritage of human knowledge and culture, it means developing and transmitting knowledge for its own sake, *it means savings science from capitalism and the state, it means making science – as research method, and as education – available to all of the population.*

STRATEGIC LINE

We need to think about building towards a university counter-power – that is, the nucleus of the new university – as part of the larger process of towards ousting ruling class power and aims, towards implementing working class self-management and a Workers’ and Peoples’ University. We can *start* move towards this through a general fight against neo-liberalism on campus, for job security, access for poor students, and democracy in the workplace, and through linking staff, students and the working class more generally...

The road to counter-power lies through day-to-day class struggles, through clarity in perspectives, through democracy and debate. There are NO short-cuts through authoritarian populism, social democratic reformism, or through nationalism... the road lies through freedom with so-

cialism, and socialism with freedom, that is, through the tradition of Bakunin and Kropotkin, of anarchism and syndicalism.

As anarchist martyr Severino diGiovanni put it:

“The right to life is not given – it is taken.”

I thank you.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Lucien van der Walt
Despotism or Democracy at Wits University?
The fight for a 'Workers' and Peoples' University' in a new South Africa in 2001
17 May 2001

Retrieved on 1st October 2021 from lucienvanderwalt.com
Guest presentation for "Keep Left" meeting, 17 May 2001, University of the Witwatersrand
(Wits), South Africa Social Science room 10, 1:15. *Revised for publication online.*

usa.anarchistlibraries.net