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Neo-liberalism comes to Wits University

600 jobs on the line

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Contents

| | |
|--|----------|
| Wits University is badly managed! | 6 |
| Wits 2001 is a neo-liberal plan! | 6 |
| Fight the Wits job losses! | 7 |

But we must go further. This fight must be linked to the broader struggle against neo-liberalism, which affects every section of the working class. We can win, and we MUST win. Neo-liberalism is taking us into the jaws of hell itself.

[I wrote this as part of the campaign against the neo-liberal Wits 2001 restructuring at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in South Africa. The plan cut jobs, mainly in support services, sought to commercialise research and teaching, and imposed a series of mergers and managerial reforms. We lost, but when we went down, we went down fighting. Anarchists, Trotskyists, autonomists and others were critical to the struggle. The Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), of which I was a founder member and a media officer, emerged from a merger of our Wits Crisis Committee and the Anti-Igoli 2002 Forum, which was fighting Johannesburg city's neo-liberal restructuring. The paper below is a good general critique, but does not really capture the anti-capitalist, proletarian, *and* libertarian character of a lot of the struggle we waged at Wits – Lucien]

Neo-liberalism has come to the University of the Witwatersrand through retrenchments, commercialisation, and privatisation.

Hundreds of workers at the University will lose their jobs after management decided on 25 February 2000 to retrench more than 623 employees in building care, catering, cleaning, grounds, maintenance, and transport. Sub-contracting companies will take their jobs by July 2000.

There will also be restructuring and rationalisation of academic staff and departments. The 9 faculties will be reduced to 5, the 99 departments will be merged into 40 “schools,” and “redundant” courses will be cancelled. A second wave of retrenchments affecting academic and administrative staff will be implemented from September 2000.

The outsourcing plans threaten workers' livelihoods. Most of the retrenched support services workers will not be re-employed by the contractors, and their prospects of employment elsewhere are limited in the current economic climate.

Outsourcing must be fought on principle and recognised as an attack on workers.

The use of contractors undermines hard won workers' rights, bashes unions and is against working class interests. Management claims it will save R30 million over the next five years. Such savings can only be achieved if the contractors pay slavery wages and refuse to give their workers any benefits. The support service jobs that are affected are already low wage, with cash wages ranging from R1200 and R3000 a month. Under the contractors these wages will fall, and workers will lose out on medical aid and other benefits. It is very difficult to unionise a contractor. The retrenchments will slash Nehawu's membership base, giving management the space to withdraw union recognition.

Wits University is badly managed!

The restructuring and retrenchments are part of a broader restructuring at Wits University, entitled Wits 2001. This was developed in cooperation with outside consultants, the University Management Associates, who were paid more than R4,5 million to develop recommendations.

The actual evidence in the consultants' reports shows that Wits is badly managed and that management must be restructured. In other words, Wits should have been internally restructured in a way that could save jobs and improve services. This might have been the best way to meet the financial squeeze posed by falling government subsidies and falling revenue from students.

Wits 2001 is a neo-liberal plan!

The whole orientation of Wits 2001 is neo-liberal. Like iGoli 2002, the neo-liberal Wits 2001 plan stresses the need to run

public services on a cost-recovery and profit-generating basis, and to downsize, privatise and outsource so-called "non-core" functions.

Disadvantaged workers bear the brunt of the retrenchments, rising fees increasingly exclude working class students, and academics, particularly those on contract, stand next in line to be fired.

The bosses have declared class war on labour through casualisation, sub-contracting, privatisation, the deregulation of trade, markets and money movements, "globalisation," and mass retrenchments. This is because capitalism is in crisis, and workers are paying the price. In South Africa, government is cutting social spending as part of the GEAR programme, which involves, among other things, less money for bursaries and falling university subsidies. One of the implications of GEAR is that the private sector will play a growing role in tertiary education.

Wits is not the first university in South Africa to be affected by neo-liberalism. Others include the University of Cape Town, the University of the Western Cape, and the University of Fort Hare, and in all cases restructuring has been associated with falling wages for workers, declining service standards, and retrenchments of workers and academics.

Fight the Wits job losses!

Workers, students, unions and progressive organisations must fight the Wits 2001 plan, and fight to save every job. It is a struggle for economic justice and a struggle to defend workers' conditions. Nehawu, in particular, has sworn to fight the retrenchments, pointing to the chasm between management's claim to be progressive, and its practice of supporting retrenchments, a cheap labour system, and union bashing.