

Wits 2001: restructuring and retrenchments

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Briefing

The ongoing restructuring of state assets has its echo in the tertiary [education] sector, which employs about 60 000 people. The trend over the last five years has been for universities and technicians to: commercialise their operations; sub-contract out 'non-core' activities; and downsize workers and academics.

The latest university affected is the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), where the university council decided, in February 2000, to outsource departments dealing with building care, catering, cleaning, grounds, maintenance, and transport. This has put over 600 jobs on the line. This is part of the 'Wits 2001' restructuring plan.

Downsizing education

Working conditions in the affected departments will plummet as outsourcing companies bring in non-unionised replacement workers on a low-wage, minimal-benefits basis. Wits management hopes to complete the process of turning secure public sector jobs into flexible cheap labour employment by June 2000. It aims to 'save over R30-million in five years through outsourcing.

But the drive to outsource is also about changing the balance of forces in the university. Outsourcing is a direct threat to the militant local branch of NEHAWU, whose membership is most affected.

Wits 2001 also affects academics. Negotiations over academic retrenchments will follow in September.

The market university

Wits' restructuring is often presented as a desperate attempt to restructure in the face of declining revenue due to falling state subsidies and declining student numbers.

But Wits 2001 is not just a cost-cutting exercise. It is also about: redefining the nature of tertiary education away from public education towards a market-driven university centred on profit generation; and an orientation towards serving the needs of business and government elites.

The victims are scores of working people and students from working class backgrounds.

Wits 2001 cannot be understood outside of the context of the ANC-led government's neo-liberal GEAR strategy.

It pushes for 'reductions in subsidisation' for and 'greater private sector involvement' in higher education. (Wits' income from government has fallen by 30% in the last five years.)

However, whether Wits 2001 will succeed in the face of determined opposition by organised labour and sections of the academics and students remains to be seen. *

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