

Wits Students Fight Fee Increases, Privatisation

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Steep fee increases and the planned privatisation of student accommodation sparked major protests at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, South Africa, this fall.

The fee hikes are the latest consequence of the university's "Wits 2001 Plan". The plan has resulted in cuts to spending, outsourcing of work and promotes the commercialisation of research and teaching.

REVOLT ON CAMPUS

Following late night mobilisations in university residences, hundreds of Wits students marched the morning of October 3 to make clear their opposition to the plan. Frustrated by university forums that prevented their voices from making a real impact on University policy, students rallied and disrupted lectures and an ever-growing crowd surged around campus.

Lecture disruptions are forbidden under the university's Code of Conduct and by midday tension between the protestors and the University administration was building. The University launched a days long media offensive, calling upon lecturers to report student protestors. Nonetheless, the protests continued into the following day and progressive academics—many of which were members of the Concerned Staff Committee (CSC) — and a number of outsourced Wits workers, publicly joined. That afternoon, riot police clashed with students, several were arrested and members of the CSC were called into a meeting with top management. Despite a hostile media, which routinely presented the protestors as vandals and troublemakers, the message was loud and clear: no to fees hikes and no to privatization.

The support was warmly received by the protestors and helped underline that the problems faced by the students were part of a larger problem in higher education as a whole. What is happening at Wits is part of the post-apartheid ANC government's neo-liberal agenda, which is reinforced by the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Both the GATS and the WTO promote the commercialisation of social services; the ANC government is a GATS signatory. This has resulted in funding cuts to public universities like Wits and significant pressure to turn universities into profit-driven "market universi~es". The result has been fees hikes, declining financial aid for poor students, and a drive to cut costs and promote commercial activities.

WITS 2001

Back in 1999, Wits adopted the Wits 2001 programme as its manifesto for restructuring. The immediate consequence was the dismissal of a quarter of Wits' total staff — over 600 workers — and the outsourcing of jobs in catering, cleaning, grounds and maintenance in 2000. The struggle to prevent this outsourcing was covered by the progressive media and .. identified as a key moment in the rise of new social movements like the Anti-Privatisation Forum, which directly challenge the ANC's programme. The outsourcing was accompanied by a series of mergers and rationalisation of academic functions, and then the establishment of a special unit, Wits Enterprise, tasked with the commercialization of university activities. The restructuring was also accompanied by a rapid centralisation of management power.

The conflicts this year must be understood as part of the ongoing struggle around the nature of higher education — and the future of Wits. Student riots in 2004, a strike by outsourced workers

in 2006, and now, student protests in 2007, lead the way in the struggle for accessible higher education, the reversal of outsourcing and an end to privatisation.

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