

Against the Bourgeois University

Fighting neo-liberalism in South African higher education

Lucien van der Walt

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Since early 2000, libertarian militants have been among those fighting against neo-liberal restructuring at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa.

WITS 2001

In February 2000, the University management announced 620 retrenchments of workers from the catering, cleaning, and grounds departments, to take place on the 30 June 2000. The management of these departments would then be taken over by outside contractors, bringing in their own labour. This step would, the University Vice Chancellor, Colin Bundy, boasted, lead to savings of R35 million over five years. True enough, but this would be at the expense of the mainly blue-collar, mainly black, workforce.

The retrenchments were part of a neo-liberal restructuring plan entitled “Wits 2001” which intends to reposition the University – the most prestigious in South Africa – as an “entrepreneurial university” orientated to the “optimisation of revenue opportunities from intellectual property and from entrepreneurial activities.” This requires downsizing non-core activities like catering and cleaning, and directing teaching and research to the needs of big business and the petty bourgeoisie.

NEO-LIBERALISM

Wits 2001 is one a wide range of neo-liberal restructuring plans spawned by the African National Congress (ANC) government’s neo-liberal macro-economic framework, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR), adopted in 1996.

GEAR calls for reduced subsidies to higher education, and a greater role for big business in universities. GEAR also advocates the privatisation of all State-owned companies, downsizing the public sector, cutting spending on social services and promoting “labour market flexibility.” The effect can only be to deepen social inequality in South Africa, enslaving the working class to capitalism. This is precisely the class agenda of the ANC, which wants to deracialise capitalism, not to destroy it.

RESIST, COMRADES!

Faced with Wits 2001, the campus branch of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers’ Union (NEHAWU) initiated a campaign against the job losses. Whereas the other 4 unions on the campus buckled and bent in the face of management pressure, disgracing themselves by agreeing to the retrenchments, NEHAWU, which organises the majority of workers affected, stood rock solid.

For four months the union organised daily pickets on the campus and a national and international campaign for support.

But NEHAWU had to fight largely alone for much of the campaign. Student support was sporadic, with actions largely confined to February and June, when an occupation of the Vice Chancellor’s offices took place. With the exception of a Concerned Academics Group, the majority of academics, organised in the scab craft union Academic Staff Association of Witwatersrand

University (Asawu) grovelled before management (despite the fact that academic retrenchments are also pending), as did the other unions.

Management also had the tacit support of the ANC, and was armed with South Africa's anti-worker labour laws, which make it impossible to undertake a protected strike against retrenchments and dismissals.

ALUTA CONTINUA

June 30 has come and gone, and the retrenchments have taken place. NEHAWU is reeling from the blow of losing half of its 800 members on campus. About 250 of the 600 retrenched workers have been re-employed by the contractors, who have made it quite clear that they will not tolerate unionism. And wages have fallen drastically: a catering worker now earns R1200 a month, down from R3000, and benefits and loan schemes have been abolished.

Further, management applied in August for court interdicts against NEHAWU and the student organisations, which supported its campaign. What particularly incensed management was the disruption of its flagship "Urban Futures" conference on the 14 July by over 100 protestors, including retrenched Wits workers.

At the time of writing, negotiations are underway to try and prevent the interdicts, which militants fear are only the first step: Bundy has indicated in private conversation that he intends to institute disciplinary action against particular activists.

Such repression is the opposite side of the coin to neo-liberalism: neo-liberalism can never be a popular programme, and so, it must be forcibly imposed.

Yet we are here to stay, here to fight. NEHAWU has survived. And there has been one crucial gain: the ad hoc coalition against Wits 2001 has merged with another crucial union campaign in Johannesburg: the campaign initiated by the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) against the neo-liberal iGoli 2002 plan to restructure greater Johannesburg.

The new coalition, which emerged from the merger is called the Anti-Privatisation Forum, and includes many diverse political currents. Yet it has become a point of attraction for workers and black communities faced with the effects of GEAR, whether through electricity cut-offs for non-payment or mass retrenchments. Similar forums have also emerged in Cape Town and Durban, the basis of a new oppositional movement.

The key now is to make sure the struggle remains self-managed, to build a broad working-class coalition on a class-struggle basis, against neo-liberalism and against capitalism.

And this requires trade union independence from the ANC, the key question facing labour in South Africa today. The ANC is a bourgeois party: behind it is local and international capital. But we know that as workers we can disrupt the neo-liberal agenda.

We believe that the new international upsurge of struggle against global capital, starting with Seattle N30, that is, the globalisation of struggle and solidarity, is perhaps the first step on the road we need to take, the road to the globalisation of workers' autonomy and the international self-managed revolution.

For a country faced with over half a million net job losses in the last three years, there is no alternative: libertarian communism or barbarism.

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