

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

Lucien van der Walt

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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 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.

Wits 2001 sees public higher education as a private business venture that should be oriented to the needs of the private sector and government, rather than a resource to empower the working class and its organisations. This means that research and training should be orientated towards the needs of the rich, rather than towards the needs of the working class and the poor.

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. GEAR openly calls for the private sector to 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.

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.

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