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Penalising the Workers

University neo-liberalism

Lucien van der Walt

13 June 2000

Battle lines have been drawn at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) over management plans to retrench more than 620 support service workers and give their jobs to casuals working for outsourcing companies at the end of this month.

The retrenchments of support services workers will have their echo at the academic level later in the year as management's "Wits 2001" restructuring plan goes ahead. A process of academic retrenchments, potentially affecting

52 people in arts, social sciences and education, is scheduled for October.

The decision to retrench workers in the building care, catering, cleaning, grounds and maintenance departments has drawn fire from unions, student organisations and academics.

The National Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) has walked out of mediation over a "social plan" to mitigate the effects of retrenchment.

Student organisations have threatened protests. And a Concerned Academics Group has released a detailed study arguing that the review process leading up to the retrenchments was biased against labour and misleading in its findings.

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At the heart of the dispute is a fundamental conflict over the nature and social responsibility of universities in the post-apartheid era.

Over the last five years, more and more universities have been restructuring in the face of a long-term decline in the Government subsidies and student numbers.

This restructuring has largely taken a neo-liberal form that centres on the privatisation of the university- downsizing workers, outsourcing departments, undermining union rights, and having teaching and research priorities set by the capitalist marketplace.

Typically, restructuring has involved shifting service functions like cleaning to outsourcing companies, closing academic departments that lack “adequate” student numbers, and adopting a hard line on student non-payment of fees.

The better-resourced universities – typically historically white universities, such as Wits- have also sought to reposition themselves in an increasingly competitive environment by prioritising disciplines that attract the most funding and fees, by developing partnerships with business and the Government, and by raising student fees.

Competing with overseas universities, and competing with each other, these universities have sought to reinvent themselves as profit-making capitalist companies, “market universities” providing “intellectual capital” and “Mode 2” (applied) research to the highest bidder.

The overall effect of the neo-liberal restructuring of universities, opponents’ charge, is the privatisation of higher education. As such it is no different in essence from the national drive to privatise championed by the African National Congress leadership and opposed by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). This process is given its blessing in the Government’s controversial Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (Gear).

Gear explicitly calls for “reductions in subsidisation” to higher education and “greater private sector involvement” – and the 1997 National Commission on Higher Education’s endorsement of “applied” education and networking the universities with business and the Government.

The winners in the process are university managers, top professors, and those faculties that adapt most readily to the demands of the “market university,” such as commerce and management.

And the losers? The neo-liberal restructuring of universities creates very many losers indeed. There are the support service workers driven out of their secure, public sector jobs despite years of loyal service. The “lucky” ones are re-employed by the contractors, but at significantly lower wages and with minimal benefits, and typically in a work environment that is resolutely anti-union.

The rest are thrown out onto the street and into the invisible prison of unemployment.

There are the older lecturers whose careers are closed as their non-profitable departments are shut down, and the junior lecturers who are trapped in a cycle of short-term contracts. And then there are the working class students, largely black, who find their dreams of a professional career dashed as they prove unable to pay ever-increasing study and residence fees.

At Wits, neo-liberalism takes the form of the Wits 2001 plan. Subsidies to the Arts and Education faculties, in which poor students are concentrated, have been slashed as money is reallocated to profitable faculties such as commerce and law. Faculties and departments are being merged, laying the basis for academic retrenchments. Power has shifted upwards towards the management as corporate styles of operation become the norm.

Evictions of working class students from residences proceed on a weekly basis. And 620 workers face a bleak future in three weeks time. Despite the “social plan,” despite vague promises

of re-employment in the outsourcing companies, these workers are losing their jobs and, in all likelihood, union representation when Nehawu's recognition agreement – based on its representation of Wits employees- comes up for review.

Like other forms of privatisation – whether Johannesburg's controversial iGoli 2002 plan or the planned sell-off of Telkom – Wits 2001 penalises working class people.

The university, which should provide a space for research unfettered by crass commercial considerations, education that empowers, and a decent working environment becomes just another business that sacrifices its staff to money.

And the model of transformation championed by workers and students over the last fifteen years – recreating the University as a liberated zone able to help eradicate the gross injustices of the apartheid past- is supplanted by neo-liberalism.