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Putting Profit First

Lucien van der Walt

7 September 2000

Wits is rapidly turning into a market university that serves the wealthy, while excluding working class people, writes Lucien van der Walt

Just more than two month ago, the University of the Witwatersrand retrenched 613 support service workers. Their jobs – in catering, cleaning, grounds, and maintenance – have been taken over by outside contractors such as Fedics and Supercare.

While Wits vice-chancellor Colin Bundy says that the new companies have also taken on about 250 of the retrenched Wits workers, he says rather less about working conditions in the new companies.

Wages have been halved and benefits slashed. A worker in one of Wits' retail outlets, for example, now earns about R1200 a month – down from more than R3000 – and with no benefits. Among the benefits lost is the right of children of all Wits employees to study free of charge. This situation has placed Wits workers in an extremely precarious financial position, and many fear that more outsourcing is coming.

Further, many supervisors in the new companies actively discourage unionisation. The mighty Wits branch of Nehawu – once a union stronghold in the tertiary education sector- is

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still reeling from the blow. Over half of its 800 members, including shop stewards, are amongst those who have lost their jobs, and the union has no real base in the new companies.

The support service retrenchments are part of Wits' ongoing restructuring plan: Wits 2001. Like the controversial iGoli 2002 plan to restructure the greater Johannesburg municipal area, Wits 2001 aims to save money through outsourcing and retrenchments. It also aims to generate profits from its "core" business of research and teaching.

And as teaching and learning become more and more orientated towards the market and to profit making, rather than to providing a social service, academic departments that do not generate sufficient revenue also fall. In the Arts faculty, for example, at least three departments facing closure, and at least 25 academic posts face the axe.

Both iGoli 2002 and Wits 2001 must be seen in the context of government's controversial Gear economic programme, which has slashed funding to higher education and local government, and which promotes "flexible labour," the downsizing of the public sector, and the commercialisation and privatisation of state assets.

On the one hand, Wits University expels loyal workers, some with many years of service, and brings in low-wage contractors. On the other hand, it markets itself to middle-class students as the "best academic address in Africa" through the "Wits by appointment" programme and organises research contracts with big business and government.

This process of "privatising" Wits has not gone unchallenged. Whilst other campus unions buckled and bent in the face of administrative pressure, and encouraged their members to sign up for retrenchment packages, Nehawu stood firm to the end. It never signed on for the University's "social plan" and picketed daily for four months, recognising that, as worker activist Severino DiGiovanni once said: "The right to life is not given – it is taken."

Faced with Bundy's refusal to negotiate on the key issues, student organisations fought to support the workers, organising an occupation of Bundy's office, as well as rallies and marches. Many students also fear Wits 2001 will mean rising student fees, excluding poor students from higher education.

The protest movement came to a head at a prestigious international conference on Urban Futures co-hosted by Wits and by the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council in July. During the week of the conference, there were several protests by the Anti-Privatisation Forum – a coalition that brings together groups organising against Wits 2001 and iGoli 2002, including retrenched Wits workers- culminating in a non-violent disruption of the final session.

But protests have taken place in the context of an increasingly authoritarian management style. The issues raised by Nehawu and the other protestors have fallen on deaf ears since the restructuring began in earnest in 1999.

And, following the Urban Futures disruption, Bundy's administration applied for court interdicts against Sasco, the SRC, the Postgraduate Association and Nehawu, as well as 14 named individuals, including Nehawu's president Vusi Nhlapo. The interdicts will, if obtained, ban protestors from activities such as making a noise, occupying or blockading offices, and "intimidation," and empower the administration to use police to arrest activists.

This attempt to place the campus under police rule is matched by the iron discipline imposed on workers in the outsourcing companies, where management aims to extract the most labour for the least money.

It also has its echo in the shift in academic governance structures, away from traditional, participatory collegial institutions such as faculties, senate and council towards a parallel structure of appointed restructuring committees, ranging from the Academic Planning and Review Committees at faculty levels to the Academic Restructuring Review Committee

and the Senior Executive Team at the top. And academic restructuring has encouraged many academics to hold their tongues, despite their deep disagreements with Wits 2001.

At the same time, the pay gap at Wits has widened radically: Bundy earns around R59, 000 a month, the new “executive Deans” who will be appointed in late 2000 will earn corporate-level salaries of maybe up to R500 000 a year, while lecturers in the most profitable courses and faculties seem set to see their pay packets jump.

This is the new face of Wits: a market university that serves the wealthy middle and upper classes, including the black middle class, while excluding working class people from decent jobs and university education, as well as excluding working class needs from its research and teaching agenda.

Colin Bundy, an ex-Marxist whose appointment was supported by labour and students, has certainly kept his inaugural promise to link Wits to Johannesburg, but this promise has changed into a threat: that of Wits 2001 blending with iGoli 2002 in a neo-liberal recipe for social inequality and polarisation.