

Fighting the privatisation at Wits

—report by—
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NEO-LIBERALISM has come to higher education with a vengeance. The tide of outsourcing of workers and services has finally reached the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) after swamping institutions as varied as Fort Hare, RAU and the University of Cape Town.

Wits management decided in February to replace 620 secure public sector, unionised, support service sector jobs with outsourced casual labour. And it has vowed to implement this decision despite growing opposition from workers, students and a section of academics. Wits management has also begun issuing final letters of demand to students not yet fully paid up on fees, heralding a wave of financial exclusions and evictions from the residences.

Nehawu, the main union representing manual staff, bears the brunt of the retrenchments. But the union recognised from the start that this is not just a struggle against job losses. It is also a struggle for the soul of higher education: the 'Wits 2001' plan to reposition Wits as a 'world class university' will recreate the university as a corporate institution orientated to the needs of the wealthy. Fees will rise, workers' conditions and rights will be undercut, and research and education will be orientated towards the needs of big business. This is explicitly spelled out in Wits' 1999 Strategic Plan, which calls for the 'formation of a university company for optimisation of revenue opportunities from intellectual property and from entrepreneurial activities'. It also advocates the promotion of 'revenue-generating activities' and 'opportunities for entrepreneurial approaches across the university'. Courses, academics, workers and students deemed unprofitable will be downsized as Wits focuses on profitable 'core' activity: research and training. Up to 52 academics from the arts and social sciences face retrenchment from October this year.

What lies behind this drive at Wits? The short answer is capitalism. The global capitalist crisis that began in the 1970s has driven capitalists into a

period of cutthroat competition. The crisis is characterised by a drive to cut labour costs and to find new, 'safe' and profitable areas for investment. This includes stock market speculation and an attack on the public sector — aiming both to reduce state interference with capitalist operations and to open up state and parastatal assets and services to the market.

Higher education is one such sector. It has become more and more deregulated, competitive, and tied to the interests of corporate capital. State subsidies have fallen, while the better positioned institutions have sought to reinvent themselves as 'market uni-

From mural at Wits:

1976

Hector Peterson killed by apartheid

2000

Masophe Makhabane by neo-liberalism.

versities' able to deliver a handsome profit to their management and its 'partners'. This is the behind the restructuring of higher education in South Africa. The ANC government's neo-liberal GEAR programme, adopted in 1996, explicitly calls for cuts in subsidies to higher education and 'greater private sector involvement'. For Wits, this has meant an income decline of about 30% over the past 5 years.

One of the most hard-line of the retrenchment advocates on the Wits council, for example, is Saki Macozoma, member of the NEC of the ANC and MD of Transnet, where he is driving the restructuring and mass downsizing of that state company. It is also well known that education minister Kader Asmal has reassured Vice Chancellor Colin Bundy, a one-time Marxist, and now born-again neo-liberal, that government supports the Wits 2001 programme. The same message is sent by government's use of riot police in Durban, which led to the death of student protester Masophe Makhabane. Wits 2001 has important political implica-

tions. Instead of simply fighting a dyed-in-the-wool, apartheid-era liberal administration, we are now up against neo-liberalism with the blessing of the ANC and with our hands tied by the 1995 Labour Relations Act, which prohibits strikes around retrenchment and dismissals.

In this situation, class politics is crucial. An understanding of the class content of neo-liberalism (labour paying for capitalism's crisis) and the role of the capitalist class institutions driving the process (including the capitalist state) requires class tactics and class struggle.

Working class solidarity and trade union mobilisation is the key to derailing Wits 2001, to create another knot of resistance to the neo-liberal agenda. So union activists at Wits have set out to link Wits 2001 to the iGoli 2002 plan to restructure Johannesburg, trying to show the links between the Wits issue and privatisation generally. Student groups such as Lesedi Socialist Study Group and SASCO have done important solidarity work with Nehawu on this issue.

At the end of the day, it is union muscle that can stop Wits 2001. If we are to return to transformation from below in higher education, we need to centre ourselves on the bedrock of union power. We need to widen and deepen union power: organising the higher grades and casual labour into the unions, centring all key union decision-making and activity on the shopfloor, and transforming the politics of the unions towards that of radical anti-capitalism from below.

The immediate task is the defence of Nehawu. The medium-term task is to escalate union power and union combativity against capitalism and the state. The long-term vision must be a 'workers' university', self-governed by the working class in its own interests through the institutional framework of radical unions in a free and libertarian society. Rock the shop floor!

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