

Union House facing demolition as university expands corporate vision

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The University of Melbourne has announced plans to demolish Union House, which currently houses the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) and other student spaces and collectives. UMSU is in negotiations with the University over the final form of a proposed student precinct to replace it when leases expire in 2018. While UMSU was first informed of this move in November 2014, the student body received no official news until a forum in late April. Many students remain oblivious.

The existing site is to be redeveloped as multi-use student housing. At present, all we know is that the new precinct will house health and counselling services, a bookshop, and a pared-down Student Centre (with many services moved online or to a phone service). North Court and Union House Theatre will not fit. Where the Food Co-op, Rowden White Library or other student spaces will go is uncertain, but students have been told to prioritise, so cuts are expected.

These developments are consistent with the university's Business Improvement Programme, so far responsible for over 500 staff cuts and the impending closure of Student Centres. The plan to develop student housing reveals that the administration are more interested in milking international students for cash than providing quality facilities.

The fragmentation of student organising bodies could also be a serious blow to future student activism, which has been instrumental in defeating fee deregulation and supporting union campaigns over working conditions and casualisation. The building has a rich history, including its use to shelter draft resisters during the campaign against the Vietnam War and as an organising centre for countless student campaigns since.

While UMSU president Rachel Withers has announced that the union will "dig in our heels" if the deal is not judged acceptable, UMSU officebearers have simply accepted the plans for cuts to services so far. Campaigners from the campus Greens, Labor Left, the Environment department, Solidarity and independents have set up a campaign to Save Union House and the services and spaces we currently enjoy, which is arguing for opposition amongst the student body.

By Jason Wong
