

# Michigan: Washtenaw Community College faculty face privatization

Mitch Marcus  
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Hundreds of Washtenaw Community College (WCC) employees face the imminent privatization of their jobs by the school administration. The move, which will have a devastating impact on the already low-paid WCC workforce, is part of an escalating nationwide attack on teachers' compensation and working conditions.

At the state and national level, political leaders have starved community colleges of funds, with the Obama administration slashing its promised "stimulus" aid for these institutions to a miserly \$2 billion in March 2010. In a sign of what is to come at community colleges across the country, WCC has responded by moving to permanently reduce its operating costs, a policy that will likely be repeated at other community colleges throughout the state.

WCC President Larry Whitworth announced that the Board of Trustees will vote in November to privatize nearly 400 part-time faculty and staff in order to save \$1 million a year in pension costs. Under the plan, all part-time faculty of the college's non-credit Lifelong Learning Program and all support staff paid up to \$12 per hour will be fired on January 1, 2011. They will then be rehired by the private temporary employment servicing company, EDUStaff.

Once handed control of a segment of the WCC workforce, EDUStaff will work to reduce employee compensation in order to slash costs and increase profits for its investors. The quality of the education provided at WCC and the working conditions of its employees will be of little significance to EDUStaff so long as its profits rise.

Employees of EDUStaff, faculty and staff will be contracted out to WCC on a per-semester basis, with no promise of a job the next semester. By removing them from its payroll, WCC will no longer have to pay 19.6

percent of the employees' salary into the Michigan Public School Employees Retirement System (MPSERS).

In announcing the decision to privatize a segment of the WCC workforce, Whitworth pointed to the \$12.9 billion in stock market losses sustained by MPSERS since 2008. "It's a matter of being fiscally responsible," Whitworth told the local Ann Arbor newspaper last August.

The WCC president has testified in Lansing in support of amending the Michigan Constitution to allow community colleges to be released from MPSERS and benefit-defined pension plans in favor of contribution-defined plans.

As the experience with charter and for-profit schools has shown, privatization of education opens the way to unprecedented attacks on teachers in the form of wage-cutting, abandonment of grievance procedures and increasing workloads.

While some college property at WCC and other community colleges has already been privatized in an effort to find new revenue sources, the privatization of faculty and support staff positions is a relatively new tactic. The proposal at WCC is being watched closely by other college boards and school districts around the state.

At the campus level, it is widely acknowledged to be a trial balloon for similar moves on a wider scale. *AnnArbor.com* commented, "If that plan worked, about 700 part-time faculty teaching for-credit courses could go the same route."

As the November vote on privatization at WCC was being announced, Michigan's higher education budget for next year was finalized in Lansing. It cuts about 1 percent overall from community colleges and 2.8 percent from universities. With state funding

collapsing, these institutions are increasingly turning to tuition hikes to meet their budgets.

On October 11, Whitworth told the WCC newspaper, the *Washtenaw Voice*, that he sees tuition increasing “for the foreseeable future.” Since 2004, tuition has risen by 33 percent at WCC, climbing 10 percent in the last year alone. The president has acknowledged that these hikes prevent many from enrolling, but insists that without them WCC would be able to offer only a “bare bones” education.

Lower-income working class students rely on WCC as a steppingstone to higher education, offering the prospect of an Associates Degree or transfer to a four-year university. In addition, as is happening at similar institutions across the country, thousands of laid-off workers have been turning to Michigan community colleges for further vocational training, resulting in record-level enrollments.

As Michigan’s Democratic-controlled state government has been slashing funding for community colleges, Washington has stood by as public education systems everywhere face financial collapse. At the community college level, whatever limited money has been made available by the federal government to deal with the pressures created by the recession has been largely siphoned off to private institutions. For example, from August 2007 through March 2010, of the \$104.8 million in federal stimulus dollars received for retraining in the Metro Detroit area, only \$31.3 million went to community colleges, with the rest going to proprietary and private colleges.

The crisis facing students and educators at WCC is not just a local problem. It is symptomatic of a nationwide assault being carried out by the political establishment on public education. It is part and parcel of the efforts to slash spending on social services, health care and all components of the public infrastructure in an effort to drive down the living standards of working people in the interests of big business.



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