Staff speak out against block teaching plan at Western Sydney University

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
8 November 2026

Staff members from The College, Western Sydney University's preparatory feeder school, spoke passionately at a National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members' meeting last week to discuss WSU management's plan to impose a block teaching regime across the entire university, one of the largest in Australia.

Educators described the "crushing" conditions inflicted on both staff and students since the block mode blueprint was forced on them at The College at the start of last year.

They outlined the oppressive staff workloads produced by having to deliver subjects and assess students in compressed four-week blocks, and the pressure from management to push students through in order to achieve inflated student retention and satisfaction rates.

For the students, mostly working-class young people trying to qualify for university courses, it has meant completing four blocks each semester, instead of four subjects over a 13-week semester, watering down the content and leaving no time for deeper or reflective learning, nor for adequate feedback.

Over the past month, WSU management has engaged in a sham consultation process with staff on its "Western Momentum" model, giving them only until last week to file submissions before the WSU Board of Trustees makes a final decision in early March. WSU students and the casual staff—on whom WSU relies for up to 80 percent of its teaching—have not even been told about it.

At the NTEU meeting, however, the trade union's branch president David Burchell tried to downplay the danger of the plan, and the agenda behind it. He said it was just a "loopy idea" from the vice chancellor and there would be plenty of time to respond next year via the "change" consultation processes in the union's latest enterprise agreement with management.

This is a warning that the NTEU leadership will seek to smother any real struggle against the plan, as it did by blocking calls by the WSU Rank-and-File Committee (RFC) for a unified fight in 2024 against its imposition at The College.

Both full-time and sessional educators at The College told the meeting about the retrograde and cost-cutting conditions there, where about half the staff have left as a result. One educator described having to finalise students' results overnight after completing a class at 9 pm in the final week of a four-week block.

Another educator described the situation as "exhausting." She said the intensity of the schedules was a psychosocial hazard. Subjects were taught at breakneck speed, under management pressure to drop a lot of content and dumb down assessments.

There was also no time for students to read and reflect, she said. If they missed classes due to illness or work or family responsibilities, they fell behind and could not catch up. Class attendances were very low, with some students only returning for the final assessment, which was conducted in class.

WSU RFC member Michael Head, a long-time WSU law educator, urged total rejection of the plan and said there had to be a campaign for support from staff and students across the university sector, because if block teaching was imposed at WSU it would spread to other public universities.

Head said the issues were connected to the rebellion taking place across Europe by students and workers against the devastation of education and social conditions to pay for war as governments rapidly remilitarised.

"Here universities are being transformed into institutions serving the narrow needs of the corporate employers and war-related industries, while the Albanese Labor government pours billions of dollars into AUKUS and other war preparations…

"This plan is about treating working-class students as second-class workplace fodder, with no room for

© World Socialist Web Site

reflective or critical thinking. The ruling class cannot tolerate any critical thought."

Head said that, exactly as the WSU RFC had warned in 2024, unless the block teaching agenda was defeated at The College it would be brought forward across the university as a whole. But NTEU representatives had opposed and blocked the RFC's call for a unified struggle against it.

Now, the largest restructuring in the university's history was being demanded on top of management's "Reset" disaster, which axed nearly 200 jobs and displaced about 600 staff last year. The NTEU and the other primary campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), had agreed to implement that offensive after calling off any action against it.

Head said the trade unions were policing the Labor government's agenda of cutting funding and restructuring universities along pro-corporate and pro-military lines to align with "national priorities" such as war-related industries. The enterprise agreements that the NTEU and CPSU were pushing through at individual universities were also imposing deeper sub-inflationary pay deals and increased workloads.

Because of such betrayals over many years, RFCs were being formed at universities, schools and other workplaces, independent of the unions, to fight for the interests of the working class, informed by the need to reorganise society for social need, not corporate profits and war, that is, along socialist lines. Head urged staff members to contact the WSU RFC for further information and discussion.

In the Zoom meeting chat, an NTEU representative accused Head of "grandstanding." That sums up the contempt and fear of the union bureaucrats of any genuine discussion, particularly any dissent with Labor's program.

David Burchell's claim that the "change" clauses in the enterprise agreements (EAs) will protect staff against the block teaching blueprint is a fraud. For example, both the recent academic and professional staff EAs pushed through by the unions at WSU allow for more "fill and spill" operations, as in the "Reset," to force displaced staff members to compete against each other for reduced numbers of jobs via a "Comparative Assessment Process."

For decades, the NTEU and CPSU have imposed sellout EAs at the universities, cutting wages in real terms and assisting restructuring. This has also left students with larger classes, narrower study options, less educational support and fewer services.

Politically, the current restructuring is being driven by the Albanese government's pro-corporate and militarised reformatting of tertiary education, as outlined in its 2024 Universities Accord report, and now being enforced by "mission compacts" that universities must sign with Labor's Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC).

On behalf of the corporate elite, the Labor government is maintaining the previous Liberal-National Coalition government's Job-ready Graduates scheme that sets punitive fees of more than $50,000 for three-year arts and humanities students, particularly seeking to push them into science and technology courses, while cutting the funding for universities for humanities degrees.

By also capping international student enrolments, Labor is increasingly starving the universities of adequate funding, along with public schools and public hospitals, and gutting the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other social programs.

To fight this offensive, university workers and students have to actively take matters into their own hands. They need to build genuinely democratic new forms of organisation—rank-and-file committees—open to all students and staff, including the majority of university workers who are no longer union members because of the unions' track records.

RFCs must become organising networks, providing and spreading information and analysis, and linking up with educators and other workers in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

For discussion and help to build RFCs, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network at:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com
Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation
Twitter: CFPE_Australia

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site