

# Canadian students protest university fee hikes and budget cuts

A reporter  
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Thousands of university and college students joined demonstrations and other actions last week to protest tuition fee hikes, spiraling student debt loads, a massive reduction in state-funding for post-secondary education, and the growing corporate presence in university administration.

The protests were organized by the Canadian Federation of Students, in cities across Canada, under the slogans: 'Reinvest in social programs and 'Keep post-secondary education public, make it accessible.'

Over the past decade, politicians of all parties have exhorted youth and the unemployed to get an education, while erecting ever greater barriers to their obtaining a quality post-secondary education.

State funding for universities and colleges has declined 30 percent in the 1990s, due to massive budget cuts imposed by both the federal and provincial governments. Shortly after the federal Liberal government began a staged, \$6 billion per year cut in the transfers it makes to the provinces to fund health care, post-secondary education and welfare, Ontario's Conservative government slashed its annual grant to universities and colleges by \$400 million, and Quebec's Parti Quebecois government cut its grant by \$300 million per year.

University tuition fees, meanwhile, have increased dramatically. According to Statistics Canada, between the 1985-86 and 1997-98 academic years, university tuition fees rose on average by 155 percent, while the overall inflation rate was just 38 percent.

Again this year, students in most provinces face tuition fee hikes. The Ontario government is allowing universities to increase fees for most programs by up to 20 percent and has completely deregulated tuition fees for all post-graduate programs and for many professional programs, including law, medicine and

dentistry. Students who started medicine at the University of Toronto this September faced a whopping 67 percent tuition fee increase. Those starting in 1999 will pay \$11,000 for a year of schooling, while in law, fees will increase to \$8,000 per year.

The Harris Tory government hopes that by targeting programs where graduates have generally gone onto lucrative careers it can mollify public opposition to deregulation, while establishing the principle that students should pay 'what the market will bear.' Clearly, the Tories intend in the future to deregulate all tuition fees, a measure that would represent a giant step in transforming post-secondary education into an exclusive preserve of the rich.

While tuition fees have skyrocketed, virtually all provinces have eliminated their student grant programs, thus forcing students to go ever deeper into debt to finance their living expenses and the rising cost of a post-secondary education. Whereas in 1990, the average student had a debt of \$13,000 on completing four years of university, the current average is \$25,000, or almost double. Forty to fifty percent of all students will experience difficulties in meeting their loan payments and ten to fifteen percent will ultimately go bankrupt, says Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce Vice-President Paul Vessey.

Steep as they have been, the tuition fees hikes of the past decade have not matched the dramatic withdrawal of state funding. Universities, therefore, have implemented wholesale cuts in programs and turned to the corporate sector as an alternate source of financing.

As a result of early retirement schemes, hiring freezes and layoffs, the number of full-time teaching jobs at Quebec's universities has been slashed by 900 over the past five years. The province's largest university, the University of Montreal, has cut its academic staff by

one-fifth.

Corporations, meanwhile, are using the growing dependence of post-secondary institutions on their financial support to gain influence over university policy.

'It is in business's best interest to get ... direct involvement in setting courses, setting the curricula, so that they will get the kind of student they want,' declares former Royal Bank of Canada President Allan Taylor in a Queen's University fundraising video.

The deregulation of tuition fees and the increasing corporate role in university governance will lead to a stratification of post-secondary education institutions that will parallel the increasing social inequality resulting from working and middle class people being unable to afford a quality education. A handful of universities will become elite research institutions, largely serving as adjuncts of corporate research and development, while the rest will be reduced to little more than vocational institutes.

The Socialist Equality Party of Canada intervened in the CFS 'Week of Action,' distributing a leaflet entitled 'The Way Forward in Defending the Right to an Education.'

'The right to a quality education--a key conquest of the social struggles of the working class ... cannot be defended,' affirmed the SEP, 'through the politics of protests, by trying to pressure the parties of big business. Rather, this struggle must be conceived of as part of a struggle to develop a political movement of the working class that challenges the subordination of the society to the capitalist market.'



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