

Ontario Liberals to keep raising post-secondary tuition fees

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Ontario's young people face mounting barriers to higher education as the province's Liberal government sanctions further hikes in university and college tuition fees.

Last month Brad Duguid, Ontario's Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities, announced that college and university undergraduate tuition fees will be allowed to rise by 3 percent per year for the next four years. Graduate university and professional programs will be allowed to raise their tuition fees by 5 percent per annum.

Duguid tried to dress up these latest increases as a matter of "fairness," since an earlier government tuition-fee framework had called for college and undergraduate students to pay as much as 5 percent more per year and those enrolled in graduate and professional programs 8 percent.

At the same time, Duguid sought to reassure big business of the Liberals' rightwing intentions, by emphasizing that under the new plan tuition fees will continue to rise more than inflation.

Most Ontario students would consider Duguid's "fairness" claim dubious to say the least. They are already paying the highest tuition fees in the country, and must contend with mounting debt, growing youth unemployment and stagnant wages.

The average Ontario undergraduate student pays \$7,100 in annual tuition fees, graduating with an average debt of \$27,000. Graduate students pay \$8,000 on average. These figures do not take into account additional compulsory fees, which run into the hundreds of dollars per year.

Under the government's new tuition-fee framework, annual tuition in 2016 will cost \$8,000 and \$9,000 for undergraduate and graduate programs, respectively.

The hikes are deeply unpopular. A recent poll conducted by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance shows that 71 percent of Ontarians believe post-secondary

tuition fees should not rise faster than inflation. Some 60 percent support a freeze in tuition fees and an increase in government funding to colleges and universities.

In a cynical show of concern about accessibility to education, the Liberals last year introduced a 30 percent tuition rebate for students with a household income of less than \$160,000. Because of various restrictions, it is estimated that less than half of all undergraduate students and one third of college students receive this aid. Graduate students and those who waited more than four years before entering a post-secondary institution are ineligible. These restrictions disproportionately affect single parents and aboriginal youth, who generally enter school much later.

The opposition Progressive Conservatives are proposing to rescind the rebate as part of a raft of retrograde changes. These, including tying student aid to academic performance and "assessments of future employability, hiring teaching-only professors, discouraging university enrollment in favour of college, and raising tuition fees even higher for vaguely-defined "elite" programs. All of these measures would negatively affect the quality of post-secondary education, with the burden falling largely on working class youth.

Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath praised last month's Liberal post-secondary fee hike announcement, calling it a "good first step." The trade union-backed NDP has propped up the minority Liberal government for the past year-and-a-half as it has implemented an austerity budget that cut billions from social spending and imposed concessions contracts on teachers by legislative fiat.

The Liberals have demanded that the already cash-starved universities and colleges cut \$40 million in spending from their budgets this year, and an additional \$80 million next year.

The public share of university funding has declined precipitously over the past two decades as the result of

cuts instituted by successive NDP, Conservative, and Liberal provincial governments. Students now shoulder 44 percent of university operating costs, up from 15 percent in 1980, when the average cost of tuition was \$830.

To compensate for years of chronic underfunding, post-secondary institutions have increasingly courted the private sector for donations. Big-business influence on university campuses across the province is ubiquitous. Many buildings and even individual classrooms bear the names of corporate brands or wealthy donors. In philanthropy, as in business, the ruling class demands a profitable return on investment, and achieves this by pressing for research and academic programs to be ever-more closely tailored to its needs.

A study published late last year by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) states that “since 1990, with few exceptions, the tuition fee burden across the country has been increasing relative to income, at a time when many families have less money to spend and are more deeply in debt.” The debt-to-income ratio for Canadian families now exceeds 150 percent, up 60 percent since 1990.

Working class families have been hit hardest. Figures from Statistics Canada show that 50 percent of youth from families in the top income quartile attend university by age 19, compared to just 31 percent of youth from the bottom quartile. Nearly 30 percent of 18-24 year olds forego a college or university education because they cannot afford it.

At a point in their lives when their productive and imaginative potentials are at their peak, young people find a crisis-ridden capitalist system raising barriers to education and denying them meaningful employment even when they graduate. The youth unemployment rate is currently 14.1 percent and rising. Almost a quarter of university graduates with a bachelor’s degree are employed in full-time jobs that do not require one. One in ten with a graduate degree are in the same position.

The Canadian Federation of Students, the country’s largest student organization and a close ally of the NDP and the unions, acts to channel the anger of students into politically harmless protests aimed at pressuring the establishment. Across the province, its regular “Drop Fees” campaign brings students out for a “Day of Action” that largely dissipates before it reaches its intended destination at Toronto’s Queen’s Park, the seat of the provincial parliament.

Reflecting the rightward shift of its social-democratic

and union patrons, the CFS recently decided to scrap its 2013 Day of Action.

The CFS, which dominates student union organizations in many universities, widely promotes identity politics. In so doing, it obscures the class nature of the cuts to higher education, which are part of big business’ drive to place the burden of the capitalist crisis on working people, and seeks to turn students away from the working class—the only social force with the power to break the subordination of all socio-economic life to the profits of big business.

Students in Ontario and across Canada need to draw the lesson of last year’s Quebec student strike. Although the students showed great militancy and determination, their six-month struggle ended in defeat. The opposition to the provincial Liberal government’s tuition hikes and broader austerity agenda was channeled behind the election of a big business Parti Quebecois government, which has now imposed social spending cuts even greater than its Liberal predecessor, including \$250 million in cuts to university budgets, and has hiked university tuition fees by 3 percent per year for the next five years.

The NDP and unions bear the principal responsibility for this. The former refused to give even nominal support for the strike. The unions professed support, while systematically isolating the striking students, and they and the student associations with which they were the most closely allied, FECQ and FEUQ, openly stumped for the PQ.

But the strike’s defeat was also a product of the politics of CLASSE, the student group which initiated the strike movement and which sections of the CFS now promote as a model for students elsewhere in Canada. CLASSE constrained the students’ struggle to a single issue protest limited to pressuring the Quebec establishment. It opposed making the strike the spearhead of a movement of the working class against the austerity program of big business as a whole and refused to challenge the authority of the unions, even when they made clear they would leave students to fight alone against the police and the Liberals’ draconian anti-strike law, Bill 78.



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