

Ontario guts financial aid for low-income students

Roger Jordan
24 January 2019

Ontario's Progressive Conservative government announced last week that it is gutting funding for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). The changes include: eliminating a "free tuition" program for low-income students; dramatically curtailing access to grants, meaning students and especially low-income students, will be forced to incur more debt; and eliminating a six-month grace period before university and college graduates have to begin paying back loans obtained through OSAP.

Outraged students have called a rally in Toronto tomorrow to protest the gutting of student aid.

Also last week, the Ford government imposed a cut in college and university budgets through the back door. In a cynical maneuver aimed at distracting attention from its OSAP cuts, the government announced that student tuition fees will be rolled back by 10 percent for the 2019-20 schoolyear. However, the government is not increasing funding to the province's post-secondary institutions to compensate for this rollback. As a result, Ontario's universities will lose \$360 million in revenues in the coming academic year—a shortfall that will be made up through increased class-sizes and other cuts. The province's 24 applied arts and technology colleges will suffer an \$80 million loss.

Additionally, Fullerton announced that starting next fall students will be able to choose not to pay many of the ancillary fees that are imposed on their tuition to cover campus services and student extra-curricular activities and organizations, including clubs and student unions. Student union leaders and university support workers have indicated that these opt-out provisions will cause student unions to reduce services such as food banks and legal aid clinics.

The "free tuition" program was part of the Liberals' cynical posturing as a "progressive" party ahead of the 2018 Ontario provincial elections. The Liberals

implemented sweeping cuts to education, healthcare, and other critical public and social services between 2010 and 2017. Then, in a desperate attempt to avert an electoral blowout, they made a feint "left," by enhancing OSAP grants, modestly increasing the minimum-wage, and limiting employers' ability to make last-minute changes to the schedules of workers on "zero-hour" contracts.

The Ford government's shredding of education grants for low-income students is part of a much broader assault on working people across the province. Since coming to power last June in a landslide victory over the despised Liberals, Ford has initiated a drive to cut billions from social spending, cancelled a \$1 an hour minimum increase, slashed welfare benefits, gutted protections for temporary and on-call workers, and given employers' increased power to force workers to work long hours without overtime pay.

Ford has combined this class-war assault with the cultivation of reaction, including a vile campaign to scapegoat refugee claimants—many of them fleeing Trump's anti-immigrant crackdown in the US—for the lack of social housing and other services. In reality, dilapidated services, rising poverty and homelessness, and the expansion of precarious, part-time employment are the direct products of more than three decades of right-wing austerity policies implemented by all of the major parties, including the trade union-backed New Democratic Party.

If students are to defeat the Ford government's assault on the right to a quality education, they must turn to the working class, the only social force with the power to break the stranglehold big business exercises over all social-economic life.

There is growing opposition among working people in Ontario, across Canada and internationally to capitalist austerity and rampant social inequality. Student protests are erupting in Ontario as opposition grows among General Motors workers to the automaker's plans to axe

15,000 jobs and shut five plants in Canada and the US, and as more than 70,000 impoverished workers in Matamoros, Mexico, are in their second week of a strike for higher pay and improved working conditions. In Europe, France has been convulsed by mass Yellow Vest anti-austerity protests for the past two months.

It is to this growing movement of the Canadian and international working class that students in Ontario must turn. Nothing will be gained by campus protests limited to appealing to Ford and Fullerton to retract their plans, or aimed at pressuring the pro-capitalist trade unions to “fight,” as advocated by the Canadian Federation of Students and pseudo-left groups like Fightback.

A turn to the working class means fighting to develop an independent political movement of the working class in opposition to the trade unions, which for decades have suppressed and isolated working class resistance, while openly backing pro-austerity, and pro-war Liberal, NDP and Parti Quebecois (PQ) governments.

The unions staunchly supported the Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne Ontario Liberal governments, as they outlawed strikes by school teachers and college instructors, dramatically raised tuition fees, slashed social spending, and privatized public services like Hydro One.

In the seven months since Ford assumed the reins of power, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) has not called a single protest demonstration, let alone sought to prepare a genuine working class counter-offensive.

The unions’ adamant opposition to any working class challenge to the Ford government is underscored by the large countdown clock that greets visitors to the OFL’s website. Measured down to the second, it informs them that there are slightly less than three-and-a-half years until the next provincial election, when Ontarians will get the chance to vote for a “progressive” government—that is for an alternative rightwing government headed by the Liberals or NDP.

The unions are terrified that working class opposition to Ford will escape their control and threaten the competitive position and rule of Canadian capital. In May 2012, at precisely the point that the Quebec students’ militant strike against tuition fee-hikes was becoming a catalyst for a broader movement of the working class, the trade unions, under the banner “After the Streets, to the Ballot Box,” moved to shut it down, while diverting opposition to austerity behind the election of a big business PQ government. As for the NDP, it refused to provide even nominal support for the students and voted in favor of a federal Conservative motion upholding the Quebec

Liberal government’s “right” to criminalize the student protest.

Students looking for a way to fight Ford’s attacks must recognize that this struggle pits them not just against his reactionary government, but against the austerity agenda of the entire ruling class. This includes the trade union-backed, Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government. Behind a smokescreen of vapid “progressive” rhetoric, the Trudeau Liberals have expanded Canada’s participation in Washington’s principal military-strategic offensives, announced plans to increase military-spending by more than 70 percent by 2026, cut tens of billions from healthcare, and handed billions of dollars in new tax breaks and other subsidies to the corporate elite. And just like Harper, Trudeau has criminalized postal worker job action so Canada Post can impose further concessions and expand precarious and multi-tier jobs.

The claims of the capitalist elite and their political representatives that there is “no money” for education and other vital public services are self-serving lies. Technology has rendered labor vastly more productive than ever before. What stands in the way of the wealth produced by the working class being used to raise living standards and better people’s lives is the subordination of social-economic life to investor profit.

Students must fuse their struggle against education cuts and the gutting of student aid and for education to be a recognized social right with the resurgent movement of the working class in Canada and around the world. By so doing they can contribute to the development of an independent political movement of the working class, freed from the grip of the bureaucratic trade union apparatuses, and armed with a socialist strategy to bring to powers a workers’ government. Such a government would radically reorganize socio-economic life so as to make fulfilling social needs, not capitalist profit, the animating principle.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact