

“Capitalism should be toppled in my opinion”

Students protest in Toronto against cuts to financial aid

Our reporters
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Students held a protest march and rally in Toronto Friday to oppose the gutting of the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) by the province’s right-wing Progressive Conservative government led by Premier Doug Ford. Around 2,000 students participated in the march, which began at Yonge-Dundas square at 2 p.m. and proceeded to the provincial legislature at Queens Park.

The Ford government’s cuts, announced January 17 by Minister for Training, Colleges, and Universities Merrilee Fullerton, include the elimination of free tuition fees for low income students and the abolition of a six-month grace period for students to start paying back their loans after graduation. The Tories also enforced a devastating 2 to 4 percent cut to university and college budgets through the back door by cutting tuition fees by 10 percent for the 2019-20 academic year, while at the same time freezing provincial grants to colleges and universities.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team intervened at the rally to discuss the impact of the cuts on students and to advance a socialist program in opposition to the ruling class’ austerity drive.

Dylan, a first-year business management student, told our reporters why he thought so many students turned out to protest. “A lot of us rely on OSAP for our funding,” he said. “I come from a family that’s not rich, we are all average, so the fact that Doug Ford did this just sucks. I feel like this isn’t something that should be happening to students.”

Moses, a visual arts student at Sheridan College, explained how the cuts would impact him. “I’m a part of this whole low-income student thing because of my family in general. I’ve got nothing so I had to depend

on OSAP just to get on with school,” he said. “My dad used to work down the street from here at Sun Life Financial. He worked there for almost 30 years, until new management came along and started doing a process of elimination. He went to work one day and his E-card just didn’t work, only to find out a week later that they’re like ‘yeah, we’re dropping you.’ My mom was in retirement for about 20 years because she had a work accident and had to force herself to go back to work even with her injury. I’m busting my butt, at the same time trying to find a part-time job.

“So for myself, I’m doing this just for my family and mostly for everyone else who is out here. It’s not right what Ford is doing... he’s screwing everyone over. He says that he’s ‘for the people,’ but, what are you really doing for the people? Just last week he increased the wages in his party and gave one of them a free house.”

A former student said, “I’m here to support students. Plus, I have outstanding student loans. I was thinking about going back to school but now that’s at risk. How can I go back to school when I have this albatross of a loan over my head that the government could call in at any time? If that happens to me, I’m utterly ruined, I’d probably lose my apartment and have to move back in with my mother. You know, I’d lose everything.”

Nicholas, a second-year history student, drew a parallel between the rise of the right-wing populist Ford and the far-right US President Donald Trump. “I just feel that Ford is attacking regular Ontarians at so many levels,” he added. “So, we have to get out and protest for things that we can’t afford to lose, like our grants for school.

“I was learning that the wealth gap is similar to what it was in the 1920s before unions and other gains,”

continued Nicholas. “Capitalism should be toppled in my opinion.”

Chloe is a third-year physics student at McMaster University. “I think it’s really damaging to our country and to future generations because fewer people will be able to go to university and get that education because of the cuts,” she explained. “I think that socialism would be more helpful to everyone than the way things are going right now.”

Alex, a business management student at Humber College, called for the protests to be broadened. “These movements need to develop into organizing everyone that is going against the government, resisting what they’re doing, by occupying classrooms, going in front of Parliament every day and yelling at them, making sure that they never get a moment of peace,” Alex stated.

Asked his opinion about Canada’s support for the Trump administration’s regime change operation in Venezuela, Alex gave voice to the widespread opposition to Washington and Ottawa’s imperialist foreign policies. “Everyone should just stay the hell out and let Venezuela do Venezuela,” he exclaimed. “Every time the United States sticks their finger into another country politically it just creates a bigger mess. If you look at Iraq, Iran, Korea was another big mess. People don’t know a lot about Vietnam but that was a totally colonialist war that the Americans took part in. During all that time, they were saying we are against colonies but in fact they had other plans to oppress these people.”

Gary, a PhD candidate who also studies at McMaster, said, “I’m encouraged to see so many people here. I think it’s necessary. I think we all have an obligation not to just lay back and accept this. And I think we can take inspiration from students in Québec in 2012 and show that they’re not the only province’s students that can show an active resistance to political decisions that we are upset by. I’m hoping this is just the start of something big.”

In 2012, a quarter of a million students and their supporters took to the streets of Montreal and other towns and cities across Québec to protest planned tuition fee hikes by the Québec Liberal government. The protests drew widespread sympathy from young people across Canada and internationally, who saw in the protests an expression of mounting frustration at

skyrocketing tuition costs and social inequality more generally.

As the movement threatened to develop into an all-out struggle against the ruling elite, and with signs of growing support among the working class for the students, the trade unions intervened to quash and sell out the protesters.

Québec’s unions, including the student associations, sabotaged the mass opposition to the Liberal government’s criminalization of the strike, and advanced the slogan “After the streets, to the ballot box!” in order to mobilize support for the pro-big business Parti Québécois in the 2012 provincial elections. Upon taking power thanks to the unions’ support, the PQ enforced the tuition fee hike and continued the imposition of vicious attacks on Québec workers. The article distributed by WSWS reporters at Friday’s demonstration stressed that while Ford was leading the current round of attacks, the cuts to student support are part of a broader austerity offensive by the entire ruling elite. It also noted the growth of working class opposition around the world, from the Yellow Vest protests in France to the mass strike by over 70,000 impoverished maquiladora workers on the southern US border in Matamoros, Mexico.

“It is to this growing movement of the Canadian and international working class that students in Ontario must turn,” the article explained. “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 Québécois (PQ) governments.”



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