Ontario government axes provincial funding for autism therapy

Penny Smith
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Ontario's right-wing populist Progressive Conservative government is slashing funding for the Ontario Autism Program (OAP), a provincially-funded initiative that provides full-time therapy to children on the autistic spectrum. The cuts, which will see many families lose more than 75 percent of their previous funding, are part of an all-out assault on critical public services launched by Premier Doug Ford and his Tories.

There are 1,105 children with autism in Ontario who are enrolled in full-time therapy treatments rather than school, and 23,000 more on a waiting listing for government-supported therapy.

The new provincial funding scheme, a one-size-fits-all approach, will introduce an annual and lifetime funding cap that will substantially reduce the subsidy currently allotted to many parents. Whereas in the past the province paid up to $90,000 per year to ensure children with autism received the therapy and care they require, the new scheme will pay money directly to the parents, and impose an annual cap of $20,000 for children aged 6 and less. Families with children aged 7 to 18 will be eligible at most for $5,000 annually.

The new model means those parents who can afford it will be forced to pay for the remaining expense out-of-pocket, while the vast majority will have to rely on the chronically underfunded public school system to care for their children.

The announcement triggered immediate and sustained protests lasting several weeks. On February 15, hundreds of parents and their supporters gathered outside the provincial legislature to protest the changes. Parents, educators, therapists and supporters are deeply concerned and angered that OAP's overhaul, slated to take effect April 1, will leave autistic children without access to essential care.

One deeply worried couple has decided to sell their home in order to pay for their 5-year-old son Dylan's therapy once the new program takes effect. This drastic measure may help them meet their son's therapy costs for now, but they don't expect to make enough in the future to pay for all the support their son will need. "It is very frustrating, and we are very desperate," Dylan's father Will Dundas told the media. The government had been putting $90,000 per year toward Dylan's therapy under the previous plan, but the family will now receive less than $2,000 per year.

Larry O'Malley, president of the Ontario Principals Council, wonders how schools will manage, given existing resources. "Staff are not trained to be therapy providers," he told CBC Radio's Metro Morning a few weeks ago. The council has requested that the education minister halt changes to the OAP until "proper supports" are in place. Along with other associations, it has sent a letter to the Education Minister stating that "schools will not be able to meet the additional and/or more intensive learning, safety and behavioural needs of these vulnerable students."

Faced with such widespread criticism, the Ford government felt compelled to make a number of minor modifications to the OAP reform, which even CBC described as "tweaks." Minister for Children and Families Lisa Macleod declared last Thursday that any children currently enrolled in treatment programs will continue to have them funded at current levels by the province until they expire. Following this, parents will be able to extend therapy at the same level for a mere six months. Macleod also lifted the income cap for the direct payments to families, meaning that parents who earn more than $250,000 will be able to receive some level of funding.

These token changes will do little to even blunt the

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impact of the government's callous cuts. Given that children on the autistic spectrum require ongoing care and therapy over many years, the prospect of being able to extend current therapy programs by a few months when they expire will still leave the vast majority of families with bills running into the tens and even hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The assault on the Ontario Autism Program comes hard on the heels of a torrent of funding cuts made by Ford's Progressive Conservatives since they were elected to office last June, with the aim of reducing government "waste" by slashing social spending to the tune of tens of billions of dollars.

Over the last few months, Ford has announced plans for a series of savage cuts to Ontario's most essential public services, including health care, education, and social assistance programs, as well as the gutting of environmental and workplace standards and the slashing of public sector jobs, all of which carry profound implications for working families, youth and other vulnerable and marginalized groups.

In December, Ford announced cuts of $25 million to after-school programs designed for vulnerable youth. Two months later he eliminated free tuition for low-income college and university students, as well as the six-month interest-free grace period before the repayment of student loans.

The WSWS reported last week on the Conservatives' "education reform." It will increase primary and secondary school class sizes, slash frontline teaching jobs, and impose regressive changes to the province's sex education and math curriculums.

Other government "restructuring" plans affecting parents and children include the total defunding of the Ontario College of Midwives, which will mean increased costs for expecting parents, and a bill which seeks to increase the number of kids allowed at daycare facilities, overriding current legislation introduced in response to a series of infant deaths at daycare facilities in 2014.

In February, the Ford government announced plans to merge Ontario's various local health networks and provincial agencies into one central authority. This will give the government the power to push through job and service cuts in the name of "efficiency" and to contract out the administration of parts of the publicly-financed health care system (Medicare) to for-profit enterprises.

If all of the recent proposals are passed into law, workers will contend with extensive layoffs and firings and the further erosion of workplace protections. In October, Ford announced that his government would be repealing a suite of minimal labour reforms instituted by the previous Liberal government, absurdly deemed by Ford a "job killer."

Ford and his Progressive Conservatives' draconian attacks are in the main a continuation and sharpening of the previous Liberal government's austerity policies. During their 15 years in power, the Liberals, with the steadfast backing of the trade union bureaucracy, advanced their own brutal assault on workers' rights and social services through the criminalization of strikes, sweeping social spending cuts, the elimination of thousands of public sector jobs, and huge tax cuts for big business and the rich.

With Ford's vicious austerity program now in full swing, the pro-capitalist unions have done absolutely nothing to mobilize working class resistance, refusing to call so much as a single significant demonstration. Instead, the Ontario Federation of Labour has a countdown clock on the front page of its website to urge visitors to wait more than three years until the next provincial election, when they will be able to elect a "progressive" government led by the Liberals or New Democrats—both parties with records of imposing brutal austerity in Ontario and beyond.

Ford's outrageous attacks on fundamental social services, including those that support children with autism and other special needs, can be opposed only if parents, youth and the vulnerable unite their struggles with working people throughout the province, across Canada, and internationally in a common fight for the reorganization of society on the basis of a socialist program that puts social needs before private, capitalist profit.

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