

Ontario government slashes post-secondary education funding and student aid

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Ontario's right-wing populist Progressive Conservative government announced sweeping cuts to post-secondary education in its first budget presented last month. The cuts are part of a concerted drive to restructure post-secondary education to tailor it even more to the labour market demands of big business and further subordinate university research to corporate needs.

Meanwhile, the government's gutting of student aid and the push of cash-starved universities to hike tuition fees for professional programs will result in many study and employment opportunities becoming the preserve of the rich and super-rich.

Annual provincial government post-secondary education and training funding is to be slashed from \$12.1 billion to \$11.4 billion—a \$700 million drop—by the end of the Tories' four-year term. This amounts to an average drop of 1 percent per year. However, when inflation is taken into account, the cuts will be even more devastating.

The budget also included changes to the post-secondary education funding model, tying the lion's share of university and college funding to government imposed "performance criteria," so as to make Ontario a "national leader" in "outcomes-based" funding. Translated into plain English, this means that university and college funding will be tied to targets and requirements set by corporate lobbyists and their political hirelings.

Until now, only a small proportion of provincial funding has been linked to institutional performance: 1.4 percent for universities and 1.2 percent for colleges. However, under the new funding scheme, the percentage of provincial grant money contingent on meeting the new performance guidelines will rise to 25 percent and with further annual increases to a whopping 60 percent by the 2024-25 fiscal year.

The performance measures have yet to be announced, but a document obtained by CBC revealed graduate earnings and employment rates, and the amount of research money raised, will figure large.

The goal of Premier Doug Ford, himself a millionaire

businessman and intellectual know-nothing, is clearly to corporatize the entire education system. Much like his role model Trump in the United States, Ford has pledged to make Ontario "open for business" by slashing taxes for the corporate elite, decimating public services, and creating a low-wage, precariously employed workforce to be ruthlessly exploited by big business.

Many educators and students are reacting to the new funding scheme with alarm, frustration and anger. Pum van Veldhoven, a sociology professor at Carleton, asserted that Ford's budget interferes with academic freedom. "Unless you teach them what we would like you to teach, you're not going to get our funding dollars—that's what he is saying ... It just shows that this government is not aware of what happens in universities, whatsoever."

Root Gorelick, a biology professor and president of the Carleton University Academic Staff Association (CUASA), commented, "If education, post-secondary education truly is a public good, then [the new funding model] is entirely wrong."

The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) which represents 17,000 faculty and academic librarians in Ontario issued a press release explaining, "Overall, performance-based funding works against quality improvement and punishes students studying at already cash-strapped institutions facing further funding cuts." OCUFA President Gyllian Phillips observed that "performance-based university funding will create a system of winners and losers, putting education quality at risk for everyone."

The government's new funding scheme also targets labour costs by amending rules for faculty employment so as to lower the average age of retirement—with the aim of slowly ejecting permanent and pensioned teaching positions from the system in favor of new hires employed under wretched terms. This process is already well advanced at many institutions, with much, and in some cases the majority, of the teaching burden falling on temporary and part-time instructors. As the OCUFA noted in its press release, "This

government's budget and proposed funding model will further incentivize the rise of precarious academic positions on Ontario's campuses."

The budget also confirmed previously-announced cuts to the province's flagship student support aid program, the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), with the purported aim of making it more "sustainable." Free tuition, only recently introduced for low-income students, has been replaced with a mix of grant and loan money, a financial arrangement that will prevent many working class people from accessing higher education.

Adding insult to injury is the elimination of the six-month interest-free grace period on student loans, and the recent announcement of a temporary closure on new student aid applications while the government clarifies its new criteria.

In sharp contrast to the protests from educators, staff and students, school administrators have expressed enthusiastic support for the government-imposed cuts. Ontario's highest-paid college administrator, Cheryl Jensen, president of Algonquin College, claims that the budget is a "good one" for her college. The University of Ottawa responded with a tweet that it "shares the government's goal to make Ontario open for business."

The Official Opposition New Democratic Party made a rare statement regarding the government cuts. Party leader Andrea Horwath said, "Other provinces are investing in education. This government is taking money away." Chris Glover, Ontario NDP Colleges and Universities critic, opined that, "With his callous cuts, Doug Ford is pushing post-secondary education farther and farther out of reach for all but the wealthiest in this province."

These rhetorical denunciations are thoroughly hypocritical and defy the political record. The trade-union backed NDP propped up minority Liberals government between 2011 and 2014, allowing them to deliver austerity budgets in a province with the lowest per capita public spending in the country and where many must choose between having food or electricity. Whenever the NDP have held provincial office across the country they have imposed austerity, and repeatedly formed or pursued alliances with the pro-austerity, pro-war Liberals.

Alongside its assault on post-secondary education, the Ford government has launched an offensive against the K-12 education system, including increased class sizes, the elimination of thousands of teaching jobs, a freeze on new hires, the cancellation of after-school programs, and a campaign to "modernize the classroom"—a slogan to justify reactionary revisions to the school curriculum and the promotion of online learning. In a rotten capitulation to the government's agenda, both the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation and the Canadian Union of Public

Employees, which represents school support staff, have requested an early start of collective bargaining, which was due to commence in the fall.

The Ford government's cuts fit into a basket of policies supported by the entire ruling class designed to devastate education and other essential public services, so they can be further toolled to the financial interests of a predatory corporate elite. Ford's government has already announced deep cuts to health care, scrapped a minimum wage increase for low-paid workers, and relaxed regulations to enable employers to pay workers less overtime pay.

The attacks in Ontario are part of the ruling elite's austerity drive internationally. Last year, the gutting of education spending and the "charterization" of public schools in the US led to a wave of teacher walkouts, and a record amount of strike action since 1986.

The Ford government and its backers in the ruling elite are well aware that these latest measures will trigger vast social opposition, and are therefore seeking to whip up a right-wing, authoritarian climate to justify deploying the full force of the capitalist state against strikes and protests.

At a May 1 protest against the cuts, demonstrators carried a cardboard guillotine covered in red paint and bearing the slogan, "No cuts but this cut." Such an entirely legitimate political protest, expressing the outrage of millions towards Ford and the entire political establishment for their destruction of working people's living standards, has been denounced by government ministers and much of the media as a "credible threat" of "extremist violence." In a highly provocative move, Ford has demanded the incident be investigated by the police.

This comes in the wake of Ford's all but explicit threat to criminalize teacher strikes in the upcoming collective bargaining round (see: "Ontario Tory government intensifies assault on workers' rights").



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