

# New Brunswick's right-wing Tory government abolishes student financial aid program without notice

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*Are you a student in New Brunswick or elsewhere in Canada? Contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at [iysseincanada@gmail.com](mailto:iysseincanada@gmail.com) to join the struggle against attacks on financial support for students and the gutting of funding for post-secondary education.*

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To the dismay of university students across New Brunswick, the right-wing Conservative government led by Premier Blain Higgs decided to scrap a program allowing them to receive employment insurance during their studies in late June without so much as a public announcement.

The Higgs government, which imposed wage and benefit concessions on over 22,000 public sector workers last November after a bitter two-week strike, has now turned on students with its abolition of the EI Connect program. Under the program, students who worked enough hours during the summer could receive employment insurance during the school year. According to the Student Federation at the Université de Moncton (FÉECUM), approximately 7,000 students were benefiting from the program, not including those who intended to use it in the fall.

Launched in 2008, the program, then called the Training and Professional Development program, was aimed at encouraging post-secondary education. At the time, average student debt in New Brunswick was the highest of any Canadian province. Initially designed for a two-year period, the program was largely limited to community college students. In 2016, the provincial government, after discussions with Ottawa, changed the qualifying assistance period to four years, allowing university students to become eligible for the program now known as EI Connection.

Highlighting the Higgs government's disregard for workers and the student community in general, students learned that the program had been scrapped from their classmates or student associations on social media. The Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour made no public announcement, limiting itself to

sending a memorandum by e-mail to some members of staff at universities and student associations.

Students responded to the news with a mixture of anger, anxiety and panic, with the majority wondering how they could continue or even begin their post-secondary education. Sharing these feelings, Eve Chamberlain, a mechanical engineering student at the Université de Moncton, launched an online petition demanding the restoration of the program that received nearly 14,000 signatures in less than a day.

The government's decision to abolish the program jeopardized the future of thousands of students. Asked by CBC's Radio-Canada, Jean-Sebastien Leger, President of the FÉECUM and one of the recipients of the email, emphasized the impact the ending of EI Connect would have on access to post-secondary education: "We are very concerned about the impact on the accessibility and ability of students, especially those from rural New Brunswick, to know if they will be able to pursue post-secondary education." According to Leger, the current average debt for a student in the province is \$40,000, a figure that will certainly climb without access to EI.

The slashing of financial aid for students by Higgs, a former Irving Oil corporate executive, comes as students across Canada and internationally are struggling to cope on low incomes under conditions of rampant inflation. Many students lost their jobs during the pandemic as the service and hospitality sectors cut back on employment during lockdowns and periods of public health restrictions. Reports are increasing from various parts of the country of the use of food banks on campuses by students struggling to make ends meet.

Well before the latest surge in prices for basic necessities, many Canadian students were unable to continue their education due to the financial burden. According to a survey commissioned by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUPE) and the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), conducted among 1,100 respondents during the first

wave of the pandemic, 3 in 4 Canadian students said they were worried about the future because of the economic consequences of the pandemic and 1 in 2 recognized that the pandemic made it more difficult to pay tuition fees and the cost of living less affordable. According to the survey, 30 percent of respondents said they had given up enrolling in a post-secondary program for the fall of 2020 because of financial pressures.

The abolition of EI Connect will be the last nail in the coffin for many young people's university careers. As H       Albert, a professor at the Universit   de Moncton's School of Social Work, and an internal vice-president of the Association of Librarians and Professors of the Universit   de Moncton (ABPPUM), pointed out in a statement: "With the rise in housing prices, which are unaffordable for people who make a very good living, it has become impossible for students..." According to ABPPUM, the impact of the end of financial aid for students on recruitment and retention on campuses could threaten the survival of the Universit   de Moncton.

Faced with widespread indignation, the Higgs government attempted to justify its decision by arguing that EI Connect did not meet the eligibility criteria for federal employment insurance and that the decision was made following Ottawa's requests to "comply with the federal program."

This excuse is absurd. While it is true that the federal government has been lobbying since the inception of the program to force Fredericton to change its terms, they were not obliged to scrap it altogether. As Serge Cormier, Liberal MP for Acadie-Bathurst, admitted, "If the New Brunswick government wants to continue the program, they just have to reverse their decision, and say they want to continue the program, it's as simple as that."

The real reason for the abolition of the program was provided by a spokesperson for the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. In an email sent to Radio-Canada, the official said that the decision was precipitated by requests from the business community: "Given the current challenges in the province's labour market, NB-EI Connection is also in conflict with the province's efforts to help employers fill vacancies." In other words, the program was abolished in order to use students already overwhelmed with unpaid studies and internships as cheap labor to satisfy the demands of big business.

Despite Cormier's attempt to absolve the federal government of responsibility for the plight of students, the Trudeau Liberal government is equally responsible for the precariousness and stress facing post-secondary students across Canada. After handing hundreds of billions of dollars to the banks and large corporations at the outset of the pandemic, the Trudeau government spearheaded a reckless

back-to-work campaign with the support of the unions. COVID-19 was allowed to spread through workplaces, schools, and university and college campuses so as to safeguard the flow of profits to Canada's corporate elite.

As the highly infectious Omicron variant spread rapidly last winter, university administrators forced a dangerous return to in-person classes that led to a surge of infections. They were taking their cue from the Trudeau government, which did nothing to stop the spread of Omicron and oversaw the dismantling of all remaining public health measures following the promotion of the far-right Freedom Convoy by the Conservative opposition.

Many students across Canada organized protests against the reckless reopening strategy, including at McGill University in Montreal and Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. The students' appeals for a return to online learning and better protection met with the total indifference of the provincial governments, regardless of their political stripe.

Higgs' decision to abolish the student employment insurance program is part of the ruling class's determined drive to cut public spending across the board in order to finance Canadian imperialism's support for the US-NATO war with Russia.

The broad support for the petition opposing the abolition of EI Connect underscores that capitalist austerity is deeply unpopular. But appeals to politicians to change their ways and provide students with adequate financial support so they can focus on their studies will fall on deaf ears. What is required is the building of a mass movement of students and young people, in alliance with education workers and other sections of the working class, to wage a political struggle for a well-funded, high-quality public education system from pre-elementary to the post-secondary level.



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