

Student protests erupt against Ford government's cuts to Ontario Student Assistance Program

Our reporters
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Widespread protests among high school and university students have erupted after the right-wing Progressive Conservative government announced sweeping cuts to Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) grants last month. Starting in September, the portion of maximum grant offered to eligible students through the province's student assistance program will drop from 85 percent to 25 percent, with the remainder made up of loans.

Over 470,000 students in Canada's most populous province rely on the modest level of OSAP support to make ends meet during their studies. Already confronting skyrocketing prices for housing and groceries, students losing out on grants will now also have to deal with increasing tuition fees, which the government is giving universities the option to hike by up to 2 percent annually for the next three years, beginning with the new academic year next September. Premier Doug Ford, a right-wing populist demagogue, demonstrated his indifference to the social consequences at a press conference last month, where he lambasted students for purchasing "cologne and fancy watches" with OSAP funds.

Hundreds of university students joined a rally organized by the Canadian Federation of Students and other student groups outside Queens Park Wednesday, chanting "No cuts, no fees, no corporate universities." One participant from Toronto Metropolitan University told the Canadian Press, "Some days I'm (already) skipping meals. I'm a mature student, so my parents aren't paying for anything. This is all coming out of my pocket. So I don't know how I'm going to do it. If I'm only in first year, I have second, third and fourth year as well. I can't graduate with \$50,000, \$60,000 in debt."

Another added, "If my OSAP becomes mostly loans, I'll be taking on almost \$80,000 (in debt) just to finish my four-year program. I'm from a low-income family; I don't have money to fall back on. If I don't work a full-time job while doing my studies, I'm going to either be in debt for the rest of my life or I'm going to have to drop out of school."

In recent days students have walked out at multiple high schools in Windsor, and at twenty high schools in Oshawa and the Durham Regional Municipality, of which it is part. College

and university students in Ottawa and Oshawa have also organized walkouts to protest the cuts.

The Ford government is working hand in glove with Mark Carney's federal Liberal government to streamline post-secondary education and ensure that students are directed into courses relevant for Canadian imperialism's militarization of society. The latest attack on students coincided with the Carney government's release of its Defence Industrial Strategy, which includes plans for hundreds of millions of dollars in funding for universities and other scientific institutions tied to research and developing advanced technologies for waging war.

As Colleges and Universities Minister Nolan Quinn put it when justifying OSAP cuts, "We want to ensure that the students are making smart decisions with some of the labour market needs that are very clearly articulated, not just in Ontario, but across Canada."

Students and workers already confront a cost-of-living crisis. The measures outlined by Quinn will therefore compel many thousands to give up on the idea of pursuing a post-secondary education.

The 2026 Canada Food Price Report anticipates that overall food prices will increase by 4 to 6 percent this year. Healthy food is becoming a luxury item. Wages, let alone student support, have not kept up with inflation, which results in massive cuts to living standards.

Students will have to make difficult decisions on how to feed themselves. They will have to eat cheap, less healthy fast food, skip meals all together or visit a food bank. Food banks are seeing an explosion in demand, according to Feed Ontario's annual Hunger report released last December. "We've reached an all-time record high with more than one million people needing to turn to food banks in the province," Carolyn Stewart, Feed Ontario CEO, told CTV News Toronto.

Ontario is also in the midst of a housing crisis, particularly in Toronto and other large cities where students must typically attempt to make ends meet. A one-bedroom apartment costs well over \$2,000 in Toronto and many other cities.

Successive governments stretching back to Mike Harris' Progressive Conservatives in the 1990s have worked to reduce

public funding for universities and colleges in order to compel them to serve the interests of corporate Canada. Ontario has consistently had the lowest level of public funding for universities compared to other provinces. In the 2022-23 academic year, the latest for which comparative data is available, Ontario's Financial Accountability Office noted that the province spent just \$10,246 per student on university funding, a massive \$6,511 below the national average. The figure for colleges was \$10,910, fully \$5,093 below the national average. These numbers put Ontario in last place among all Canadian provinces for university funding per student and second to last for its funding of colleges.

This disastrous situation, described in 2023 by a blue-ribbon government panel as "abysmal," is the product of policies enforced by successive governments of all political stripes.

Although the provincial Liberal government made much of its expansion of post-secondary education to larger numbers of students between 2005 and 2018, this was combined with a refusal to maintain adequate funding, with the result that funding per student dropped in real terms during this period. After Ford took power in 2018 on a program of escalating the austerity measures begun under his Liberal predecessor, his government announced a decision to "freeze tuition fees," which it touted in populist language as a means to make education more "affordable."

The reality was that the freeze did nothing to improve conditions for students, whose biggest cost pressures come from the costs for housing and basic necessities like food. In addition, universities and colleges confronted a deepening financial crisis because the freeze was accompanied by further cuts to public funding for their budgets. In an attempt to offset this pressure, universities turned on a large scale to attracting international students paying exorbitant tuition fees to finance their operations.

As part of its sharp swing to the political right, the federal Liberal government decided in early 2024 to impose caps on international students and initiated a broader crackdown on immigration. Ontario's quota for international students was halved, plunging post-secondary institutions into deeper financial trouble. According to one estimate, some 10,000 workers have lost their jobs at Ontario colleges over the past year due to budget cuts.

In this context, the pitiful \$6.4 billion over four years in additional funding announced by Quinn for universities and colleges last month alongside the OSAP cuts does not even come close to resolving the crisis. The government-commissioned panel in 2023 recommended additional annual funding of \$7 billion to protect post-secondary education from further deterioration.

The Ford government's assault on student assistance is a component of a wider onslaught by Canada's ruling class on all public services and social programs. The established political parties, functioning on behalf of the financial oligarchy that

dominates social and economic life, are only prepared to fund education to the extent that it produces results and human labour suitable for the needs of Canadian imperialism. These needs have been made clear by Carney over the past year with his announcement to spend 5 percent of the GDP on war by 2035, his government's virtual abrogation of the right to strike, and its involvement in an historic restructuring of the postal service along the lines of Amazon to serve as a benchmark for the entire public service. Carney's open endorsement of American imperialism's criminal and barbaric war on Iran will accelerate this process.

These sustained attacks create the conditions for students to mobilize broad support in defence of well-funded and affordable public education from kindergarten to the post-secondary level. The precondition for this is a decisive break from any perspective based on the idea that Ford and his backers in the oligarchy can be fought on the university campuses alone or by one-off protests outside the provincial legislature. This is a ruling class determined to offload their crisis onto the backs of young people and workers. The minority federal Liberal government is backed in parliament by the social democratic New Democratic Party and enjoys a helping hand to maintain control of opposition outside parliament from its allies in the trade union bureaucracy.

What is above all required for students to secure their demands is an orientation to the struggles of the working class. All workers, whether postal workers, autoworkers, public sector employees, and low-paid and precariously employed workers throughout the private sector have an interest in securing high-quality publicly funded education for all, whether it benefits themselves or their children. By linking the fight against funding cuts for post-secondary education with the fight against job cuts, the undermining of worker rights, and wage and benefit cuts and the defence of health care and all public services, students can contribute to the building of a powerful mass mobilization against capitalist austerity and imperialist war. This will be realized only if students adopt a socialist program that places the social needs of the vast majority before the accumulation of private profit by the oligarchs.



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