Ontario government’s slashing of student assistance fuels mounting opposition across university and college campuses

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Opposition to Ontario’s right-wing Progressive Conservative government led by Premier Doug Ford has been growing across the province’s university and college campuses since Ford announced sweeping cuts to student grants last February. The Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), on which about 450,000 post-secondary students rely, was restructured to compel students to fund the vast majority of their tuition through loans, placing them tens of thousands of dollars in debt.

Repeated protests, including by high school students, have occurred since a large mobilization at Queen’s Park in early March. Various organizations have called one-day student strikes for this Thursday, November 5.

Ontario students will join a burgeoning movement of young people against capitalist cost-cutting, and militarism and war that has spread across Europe in recent weeks and begun to draw support from workers.

The Ford government’s cut to OSAP reduced the portion of student assistance available as a grant from 85 percent to 25 percent, forcing students to take on tens of thousands in debt via costly loans to obtain their degree. Working-class students are far and away the worst impacted.

Moreover, after unsubstantiated reports about administration-abetted abuse of OSAP at a handful of private career college campuses, the government declared that students at these institutions would no longer be eligible for OSAP grants. In early October, it suspended all current OSAP payments to private career college students, plunging thousands of students into crisis.

The gutting of OSAP is one front in a coordinated offensive on post-secondary education. Ford ended the seven-year tuition freeze his government enacted in 2019, permitting institutions to raise fees every year henceforth up to the rate of inflation. The freeze was never a gift to students. Rather it was a device to force universities to balance their books by cutting programs and services and recruiting international students and charging them exorbitant fees. With that revenue stream now slashed by the federal Liberal government’s cap on foreign students, the burden is being shifted directly onto the remaining students.

Ontario spent an average of just over $10,500 per university student during the 2023-24 education year, dead last among the provinces and nearly $7,000 below the national average. As government funding has fallen, tuition’s share has risen relentlessly and student debt has skyrocketed.

The government is also moving to interfere with the funding of student unions, threatening the ancillary fees that support campus food banks, legal clinics, and countless other critical services.

At the same time, the Progressive Conservatives are cutting public spending across the board. Ford has enforced a massive reduction in per-student funding in elementary and secondary schools since taking power in 2018. His government is pushing ahead with widespread health care privatization and the gutting of social programs, while offering tax breaks and other handouts to corporations and private developers. The government is currently in the midst of a drive to impose concessionary contracts on over 250,000 education workers in the province’s elementary and secondary schools, and at has centralized key decision-making powers, weakening school boards, in order to push through budget cuts.

Ford’s austerity drive is part of his government’s contribution to the Canadian ruling elite’s redirection of society’s resources to wage world war and enrich the financial oligarchy.

Liberal Prime Minister Mark Carney has pledged to raise military spending to 5 percent of GDP by 2035, which represents over $150 billion a year. He has already initiated moves to better integrate the universities into the arms supply chain. Ford's own Ontario Defence Industrial Strategy aims to triple the province’s military workforce. Carney’s government has also announced a “mega deduction” for corporations to attract global investment and is expanding its powers to ban strikes so as to better suppress popular opposition to its agenda of austerity and war.

In response to mounting anger among students over austerity and war, a coalition of trade unions and local activist groups led by the Canadian Federation of Students Ontario (CFSO) called “Hands Off Our Education” is planning a province-wide student strike on November 5. The CFSO makes radical-sounding references to the need to build “student power” and calls for a seat at the table with the Ford government to negotiate post-secondary education funding. Its model is the 2012 Quebec student strike.

The 2012 province-wide strike of university and CEGEP (technical and pre-university college) students began as a struggle against tuition hikes, but soon threatened to become the catalyst for a mass movement of the working class against austerity and social inequality.

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When the Charest Liberal government criminalized the strike with the anti-democratic Bill 78, hundreds of thousands of workers joined the students in the streets, and the movement threatened to spread beyond Quebec's borders. It was at this point that the trade union bureaucracy moved to shut it down, adopting the slogan "After the Streets, to the Ballot Box" and diverting the movement behind the election of a pro-austerity Parti Québécois (PQ) government. Invoking Quebec's "self-determination," the province's union bureaucracy ordered unions outside of the province not to provide any support to the striking students.

Upon its election in September 2012, the PQ government cancelled Charest's tuition hikes. But no sooner had it restabilized the political situation, than it implemented its own program of social spending cuts, including announcing a program of annual yearly university tuition hikes in perpetuity.

To hold up 2012 as a "victory" is to conceal the decisive role of the unions, including the CLASSE student coalition, in strangling the student movement at the very moment it threatened to trigger a mass movement of the working class against the austerity agenda of the entire ruling class.

The "Hands Off Our Education" coalition is not an alternative to this betrayal, but reproduces the pro-capitalist, nationalist and provincialist politics that led to the 2012 strike's defeat. Endorsed by a handful of unions like the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario and CUPE Ontario, it offers no orientation to the working class and makes no call to link the opposition of students to the OSAP cuts and the Ford government with the struggles of postal workers, autoworkers, and public sector employees, even as an upsurge in working-class resistance is sweeping the province, Canada, and internationally.

Ontario students will launch their strike on the same day that hundreds of thousands of workers across France participate in a general strike against President Macron's assault on public services to pay for rearmament and the enrichment of the oligarchy, and as protests of overwhelmingly young people against war, social inequality, conscription, and dilapidated education systems sweep across Europe. However, the union-backed Coalition's strategy is campus-based protest politics confined to Ontario's borders.

Students are directed to make empty appeals to Ford to "negotiate" with student representatives, or to the NDP and union leaderships to do something for education after they defeat Ford at the next election in 2029. For years, the unions and NDP have promoted the Liberals as a "lesser evil," even as they implemented austerity measures and illegalized strikes when in power. The NDP, wherever it has held office, has implemented austerity just as ruthlessly as the Liberals and Conservatives.

Instead, students must turn to the working class, the only social force with the power to defeat the financial oligarchy. It produces all the wealth in society. It can halt economic production and bring the operations of the capitalist system to a halt. Workers have a direct interest in fighting for publicly funded education for all from elementary to post-secondary levels, because it is on these systems that their families rely for their future.

The contracts of 275,000 Ontario education workers, including teachers and support staff, expired at the end of August, and they confront a government determined to dismantle public education. Some 1,200 workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario, are in their third month of a strike to demand an end to the barbaric piecework system, which claimed the lives of three workers on the job between 2020 and 2022. Nearly 1,300 mine workers are in the second week of a strike at the Teck Resources Highland Valley Copper mine in British Columbia.

Five hundred steelworkers at Stelco face layoff due to the reactionary trade war between American and Canadian imperialism. And over 9,000 Stellantis autoworkers have just voted by 97 percent to strike against job cuts and the selloff of the Brampton assembly plant to a military vehicle producer.

These struggles are the real basis of a worker-led counteroffensive against austerity and war to which students must lend their support and politically stimulate.

For students to turn to the working class, they must engage with the central strategic experiences made by the Trotskyist movement over more than a century, above all the necessity to build a revolutionary political leadership to direct the millions of workers and young people being radicalized by capitalism's ever deepening world crisis.

The objective interests of the vast majority of the population for decent public services, secure employment, and a free, well-funded education system are incompatible with the capitalists' drive to boost corporate profits and wage war for their predatory economic and geopolitical interests. This conflict must form the basis of a conscious strategy for the working class to fight for political power and the reorganization of society along socialist lines.

Workers and young people must break politically from the trade unions, which are working to smother the students' opposition. The unions sabotage workers' struggles by straitjacketing them within the pro-employer collective bargaining system, and by systematically dividing workers in Canada from their class brothers and sisters in the US through their championing of the Carney government-led "Team Canada."

Students and workers must build rank-and-file committees in schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands, and unite them through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The demand for free, high-quality, publicly funded education is inseparable from the struggle for a workers' government, which the rank-and-file committees must spearhead. Education would be funded by the expropriation of the banks, financial oligarchs and corporations, and the reorganization of social and economic life under the democratic control of the workers.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality, together with the Socialist Equality Party, is fighting for this perspective across Canada and around the world. We urge students to join and build the IYSSE.

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