



Membership Advisory Unifor Ontario Region

January 24, 2019

Overview

On January 17, the Minister of Training, College and Universities Merrilee Fullerton made several announcements related to post-secondary student fees and the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).

For the nearly 4,000 Unifor members who work on university and college campuses, these announcements have potential direct impacts on the quality of work in the post-secondary education sector. For all Unifor members in Ontario, the announcement can be interpreted as an attack on the importance of accessible, high quality education for all, as well as an attack on the existence of independent student unions.

Below is a summary of the announcements and the negative impacts of these policy decisions.

Announcement

The Minister announced the following changes:

- An across the board tuition fee reduction of 10% for students at every publically-assisted college and university.
- A reduction in non-repayable grants and an increase in student loans
- The elimination of the 6-month grace period for loan repayment.
- Undoing some of the improvements made to OSAP by the previous government.
- Introducing a “Student Choice Initiative”
- Requiring institutions to provide an online opt-out option for all “non-essential” non-tuition fees.

Analysis

On the tuition fee cut

The reduction of tuition fees has consistently been one of the top priorities of the student movement. In a vacuum, this would be good for students, but in the current context, this move does not sound as good as the Ford government is making it out to be.

First, a 10% tuition fee reduction would reduce revenue drastically, estimated to be a reduction of 4% in revenue for college and university budgets. The Ford government has not increased operating funding to post-secondary institutions (and does not plan to), so institutions will be forced to make up for this funding shortfall somehow. Ontario institutions on a per-student basis are already among the lowest funded compared to the rest of the provinces in Canada.

On the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP)

The previous Wynne government had touted its “Free Tuition” initiative in the 2016 budget. While the tagline was misleading, the impact was that OSAP was streamlined to increase non-repayable grant to students in financial need, and decrease loan reliance for students. Essentially, the government eliminated the Tuition and Education Tax Credits (for additional revenue) and streamlined existing loan and grant programs to make this happen. As a result, OSAP provided \$1.7 billion to 441,000 students in the form of 98% in non-repayable grants and 2% in loans. Whereas in the academic year prior to the change, 360,000 students received \$1.4 billion in funding, with about 60% of it in grants and 40% in loans.

The new OSAP changes will reverse directions by re-directing funding from non-repayable grants to more loan programs. In essence, students will now have to rely more on loans and carry debt. This move will likely make post-secondary education more expensive for many students (especially from lower-income families), despite the 10% tuition fee reduction.

On opting out of “non-essential” non-tuition fees

While not explicitly stating this in their announcement, this move is a direct attack on students’ unions across the province by creating the conditions to defund them. In the labour movement, this change could be interpreted as “voluntary” unionism.

Framing this change as “Student Choice” is as destructive as what are commonly referred to as “right-to-work” laws. While the Ford government claims to make this announcement in favour of students, and their choice to opt-out of certain fees, the result will be to defund important services that have been approved, through history, by students on a campus. In other words, this announcement is not about the money: it is about attacking the student movement as one of the few spaces where students can learn, agitate, engage politically and resist dominant forces in society.

Structure of the student movement

Independent student unions have been the single, most consistent force in resisting tuition fee increases, cuts to post-secondary education, and proposing a vision for an accessible, affordable system of college and university education in Ontario, through history. They are democratic structures that advocate, provide services, and collectively move students forward as a class. Most student union levies have been democratically decided by votes and referendum, and fund anything from women's centres, to foot patrols, to student media, and many more services.

Students' unions in Canada are structured much like labour unions, with local unions providing services and representation to all members of a campus. Students form unions to give structure to their independent democratic expression on campus. They are independent from University and College administrations just like labour unions are independent from employers, and thus

ensure student and worker-led representation. By their very nature, unions involve all students as part of the development of democratic engagement, society, and debate among students.

Through their unions, students:

- Coordinate and provide lower cost health insurance plans.
- Fought for, won and provide affordable transit passes for students.
- Provide academic support and advocate services.
- Have representatives that sit on academic councils.
- Run student-owned food services, food banks and employ food service workers.
- Own space and fund student clubs and services on campus.
- Run non-profit businesses on campuses such as bookstores, cafes, corner stores, pubs, printing services.
- Run and coordinate student housing services.
- Fund and run sexual assault and mental wellness support services.
- Fund services and advocate for students from marginalized communities.

Conclusions

While the Ford government has made announcements, a number of technical details are yet to be made public, such as the nature of the changes and the process to implement them.

It is clear that post-secondary education institutions in Ontario will not be able to simply make up for the funding shortfall through “efficiencies,” which is the expectation of the Ford government. Perhaps they will be looking to save money in labour costs – it is possible that collective bargaining will be impacted indirectly or directly as a result of this move. The cut to revenue will inevitably impact the quality of education for students.

Most seriously, an attack on existence of independent student unions cannot be discounted by unions. Doug Ford's announcement is nothing but an imitation of "right-to-work" laws and the elimination of the Rand formula that threatens the existence and purpose of the labour movement. To defend the existence of the labour movement in Canada today is to stand in solidarity with students against this attack by the Ford government.