

CUPE 3902 Backgrounder on the Ford Government's Education Reform
Presented to the CUPE 3902 Working Group on Precarious Employment

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Introduction

On January 17 2019, the Ontario Government announced a series of changes affecting the province's post-secondary sector. These changes include:

- A 10% reduction in domestic student tuition fees for 2019-2020, followed by a tuition freeze for 2020-2021.
- More restrictive criteria to qualify for tuition grants and Ontario Student Assistance Plan (OSAP) funding, along with less flexible repayment terms for OSAP loan recipients.
- Making "non-essential" post-secondary student fees optional.

These changes were initiated by an administration that campaigned under the slogan "A Government for *the* People". But for *which* people? Not for the over 800 thousand students attending Ontario's publically funded post-secondary schools. Not for the 55 thousand academic staff working there. And certainly not for the tens of thousands of contract academic employees who work alongside them.¹

This brief focuses on the implications of Ford's recent announcement for the third group – the contract academic workers. Specifically, it considers how his Government's tampering with post-secondary tuition fees is likely to impact the over 1500 contract academic employees at U of T who are represented by Unit 3. Before considering these implications however, the discussion is prefaced by several key points:

We are all in this together. By focusing largely on the consequences of the tuition fee change for Unit 3 employees, it is not our intention to diminish the challenges that other groups face from Ford's suite of reforms. We share your concerns, and we sympathize with your struggles. Rather, the focus of this brief is informed by the need to keep the discussion manageable, while highlighting the aspects of Ford's recent announcement that are most relevant for Unit 3. Chief among these is the Ford Government's forthcoming change to tuition fees in the Fall of 2019.

A case for others to build on and act from. While this brief is first and foremost meant to inform members of Unit 3, all of Ontario's post-secondary institutions rely on contract academic workers to some degree. Therefore, we hope that comparable employee groups outside U of T also find this brief informative.

The Administration's Dilemma: Reducing Costs or Increasing Revenues?

It does not take a PhD to recognize that the 10% tuition fee reduction, advertised as an initiative to make education more affordable, is a stealthily packaged budget cut for Ontario's post-secondary schools. Since the Ford Government refuses to increase funding to offset the revenue shortfall created by the tuition cut, schools are expected to find their own solution to make up the difference. Broadly

¹ As of 2016-2017, there were approximately 813,351 full and part-time students enrolled in Ontario's post-secondary institutions. Statistics Canada. [Table 37-10-0011-01 Post-secondary enrolments, by program type, credential type, Classification of Instructional Programs, Primary Grouping \(CIP_PG\), registration status and sex.](#) In 2016, there were approximately 55 thousand academic staff employed at Ontario's universities and colleges. See Figure 7 in: [No Temporary Solution: Ontario's shifting college and university workforce \(2018\) by the CCPA.](#)

speaking, that solution can be achieved in three ways: 1) Maintaining the same level of spending while securing enough revenue from alternate sources to offset the shortfall; 2) Reduce spending commensurate with the revenue drop and forgo alternate revenue sources; 3) A combination of spending cuts while aiming to secure enough revenue from alternate sources to offset the shortfall. Most schools are likely to pursue Option 3 since, cutting expenses while actively pursuing alternate revenue sources still minimizes the full effect of a shortfall if funding goals fail to be met. The impact this path will have for stakeholders in the post-secondary sector depends largely on two factors: where and in what way Ontario's schools secure alternate sources revenue; and how these schools allocate and prioritize their tandemly pursued spending cuts.

It is safe to assume that U of T's fundraising strategies will be pursued more aggressively. These include private donations and endowments from individuals as well as corporations and more private sector-funded partnerships. It is also feasible that the university might expand the admission of international students. Since this student group falls outside the province's funding formula, it is a highly lucrative and inexhaustible source of additional revenue for the university.

Regarding the implementation of austerity measures, it is also safe to assume that the university will prioritize and allocate spending changes like a private company navigating a projected series of bad fiscal quarters. This means focusing on operations seen as essential for bringing the most value to the university's brand. It also means limiting funds for operations and commitments it sees as less core to its brand. For example, placing tighter restrictions on funding and travel for certain types of university business, more aggressive cost reductions for ancillary services, hiring freezes or reductions, encouraging early retirement, adopting processes and procedures that privilege cost efficiency and quantitative performance over equity and quality, and the expansion of sessional teaching opportunities. These projected courses of action are more than just speculation. The Ford Government recently signed Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA3) with each of Ontario's 45 colleges and universities (SMA3) that would actually encourage these types of initiatives.²

Profs to the Left of Me, Students to the Right: Unit 3 – Stuck in the Middle with You

Many of the initiatives listed above hold some particular challenges for Unit 3 employees. This stems from the fact that structurally, this group is positioned between two other main bodies, both of whom Unit 3 serves. On one side, there are the professors, researchers, and other academics - a group whose employment, job control, and access to resources is largely protected because they are seen as part of the university's core value-generating activities. On the other side, there are the students who are paying for a quality education. The specific challenges Unit 3 members are likely to face serving each of these groups is discussed as follows.

The Expansion of Precarious Employment

In 2018, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario released a report on the sustainability of university expenditures.³ In this report, it notes that the role and contributions of part-time instructors is central to the question of cost sustainability among Ontario's post-secondary institutions (2018: 23). After weighing the relative costs of having full-time tenure stream faculty teach versus part-time faculty, the report concludes that; "...if at any time a university wishes to boost its course-based teaching capacity, and only that, hiring part-time instructors is a cost-effective option" (2018:27). In other words, if a university wants to expand its course offering, it is best from a cost perspective to pursue policies that promote precarious employment.

Boosting course-based teaching capacity is likely to be one of the main ways in which U of T deals with the forthcoming budget changes, and Unit 3 is likely to be caught up in this. As previously mentioned,

² [Government of Ontario: College and University Strategic Mandate Agreements, 2017-2020.](#)

³ [Weingarten, H. P., Jonker, L., Kaufman, A. & Hicks, M. \(2018\). University Sustainability: Expenditures. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.](#)

expanding university admissions, especially to international students, represents a lucrative way for the university to cushion the revenue shortfall from tuition fee cuts.⁴ And when combined with a cheap and flexible labour source (e.g. sessional instructors), these initiatives further translate into a type of *economy of scale* for the university. Also mentioned was that part of the university's cost reduction strategy may entail focusing remaining resources on core value-generating activities. For new and existing tenure-stream faculty, that translates into more pressure to focus on research and outside funding, and less on teaching.⁵ These scenarios, combined with the strong likelihood of departmental hiring reductions/freezes for tenure-stream faculty, suggest a future where U of T's students, professors, and the administration, become more reliant on a reserve army of part-time academic workers to manage a growing batch of teaching responsibilities.

For Unit 3 members, there are three potential dimensions to this likely scenario. First, there might be more work to go around for these members in the coming years as the university's reliance on sessional instructor's increases. And if the demand leads to a net increase in our membership, this is beneficial to Unit 3's bargaining power heading into the next round of bargaining.⁶ However, an increasing reliance on part-time teaching staff does not address the underlying precarity currently defining the employment in Unit 3 and the other units, nor the ways in which it negatively impacts our lives and wellbeing.⁷ The third view to this scenario deserves its own section.

Bait and Switch

A third view is that the likely increase in the university's temporary teaching needs could bypass Unit 3 through the hiring of more Unit 1 Course Instructors. This latter group consists of graduate students in dedicated programs hired to work as temporary lecturers and course runners as they continue to pay their expensive tuition. They typically make on average, much less than the poverty line in these positions.

Unit 1 members, who are classified as Course Instructors and not Sessional Lecturers, are paid at a lower rate than Unit 3. So the Employer has an incentive to fill teaching positions with as many Unit 1 members as possible. C.U.P.E. 3902 has currently narrowed the pay gap between Unit 1 Course Instructors and Unit 3 Sessional Lecturers 1 to only \$200. However, when this differential is multiplied by hundreds or thousands of course postings over the next few years, it still adds up to a significant source of costs savings, especially when you consider that the Employer will also be under additional pressure to meet the commitments of its funding packages to graduate students. It is also worth mentioning that while the Unit 3 agreement has restrictions about when a course can be filled with a Unit 1 member rather than a Unit 3 member, Ontario's employers have little incentive to honour collective agreements right now. The Ford Government has made its anti-union stance crystal clear since taking office that collective agreements, legally binding as they are, need not be taken too seriously by employers if they interfere with profit. The current anti-union climate ushered in by the Ford Government also suggests that as Ontario's post-secondary institutions continue to feel the pinch of Ford's tuition cuts, achieving wage parity between Unit 1 Course Instructors and Unit 3 Sessional Lecturers 1 is likely to be difficult in future negotiations.

Overall, the austerity being encouraged through the Ford Government's policies therefore suggests that the University administration has much incentive to shift the burden of labour from one precarious

⁴In a February 24 2019 [article](#) of the U of T campus newspaper The Varsity, the article notes that international student enrollment has already skyrocketed at U of T over the last 10 years. And, revenue from this source surpasses that of provincial grants.

⁵This does not imply tenure-stream faculty will be less committed to teaching. Only that the administration's responses to Ford's changes, might require them to make some strategic decisions about where to channel the majority of their efforts and remaining resources.

⁶ E.g. bargaining over pathways to more secure employment, etc.

⁷ For more information on this topic, see the CUPE 3902 brief from October 2018.

workforce to another without needing to create more reliable positions. Meanwhile, the very bodies that can help this from happening are themselves under increasing attack.

More Challenges to Delivering Quality Education

Building on the likely assumption that U of T will expand its admissions and its course capacity while implementing policies that prioritize research activities over teaching, part-time instructors will face additional strain to provide quality education to larger class sizes. Clearly, if class sizes increase without a proportionate increase in resources and teaching support, Unit 3 members are essentially being asked to do more with less. The result is less time per student for support activities and feedback, and that translates into a poorer learning experience for U of T's students, as well as increased workloads and stress for Unit 3 at the same pay.

Further Loss of Academic Freedom

It was previously stated that along with cost-saving labour strategies and general spending reductions, U of T is also likely to seek out alternate sources of funding to make up for lost revenue. Given its reputation as a top tier school in research and innovation, U of T is likely to have great success with securing extra funds through private sector donations and partnerships. But should the school follow this path further, it may be sacrificing the academic freedom of its employees. The controversy around private interests on campus encroaching on academic freedom is not new, and the issue affects all employees involved in teaching or research. But sessional post-secondary instructors are exceptionally vulnerable to reprisal and marginalization when exercising academic freedom, because their precarious employment status does not give them the same kinds of protections enjoyed by tenure-stream faculty.⁸ And, this threat to Unit 3 members will only grow if more private money flows into U of T. Therefore, Unit 3 members should be particularly wary that their writing, and their views expressed in the lecture hall or even outside the classroom (e.g. via social media) might come under the increasing scrutiny of a university eager to placate the business interests that are funding it.

Insult to Injury

Most insulting, is that these cost reduction measures have been imposed by a government that clearly fails to lead by example. While the public is being led to believe that changes across Ontario's education sector and other areas are necessary to balance the province's finances, this same government voted in October 2018 to raise housing allowances for MPPs by 20%, from \$1,910 to \$2,300.⁹ But thanks to the 10% tuition reduction that's coming, U of T students will now be able to take the money they've "saved" and use it for the rent increases that have come in the wake of the Conservatives gutting rent control in November 2018. We are not living under a Ford government for the people, but a *fraud government for itself!*

The forthcoming challenges do not have to divide us.

Historically, relations among stakeholders tend to become more adversarial in environments of perceived resource scarcity. And clearly, we are entering a period of restraint that has the potential to divide the many groups that make up the U of T community. Perhaps that is what the Ford Government would like, but let's not give it the satisfaction. Unit 3 understands that all members of the university community are in this together. But the precarious position of Unit 3 workers makes this group particularly vulnerable to the changes that lay ahead. As the administration lays out a plan for dealing with these challenges over the next few years, all we ask is that Unit 3 receive the same consideration and respect for the work that we do as U of T's more permanent staff.

⁸For an excellent seminal article on the issue of academic freedom and part-time instructors see; [Byrne, J. Peter, "Academic Freedom of Part-Time Faculty" \(2001\). Georgetown Law Faculty Publications and Other Works. 1690.](#)

⁹[Ford's Conservatives Secretly Increased Their Taxpayer-Funded Housing Allowance While Gutting Rent Control](#)