

Post-Secondary Education

This profile is intended to provide CUPE members with basic information about the sector they work in from a national perspective. Find all our sector profiles and more information online at cupe.ca

OCTOBER 20-22 | 2020

CUPE represents 74,600 members in over 230 bargaining units in the post-secondary education (PSE) sector. Our members work in universities, colleges and student-led organizations.

CUPE PSE members work in a wide variety of positions. We represent academic workers and support staff alike. Academic workers include instructors, researchers, teaching assistants and lab techs; support staff work in grounds and building maintenance, libraries, food services, caretaking, information technology, clerical support and administration.

Before COVID-19 struck, more than 430,000 people worked at universities, colleges, vocational and trade institutions in Canada. CUPE is a major union in universities, representing approximately 29 per cent of all non-faculty employees. CUPE has far fewer members in colleges, but we have a significant number of college members in BC and Quebec.

FUNDING

Despite overwhelming evidence that investing in PSE makes sense for Canada's social and economic well-being, both provincial and federal governments are persistently underfunding PSE.

Universities and colleges have seen the proportion of government funding plummet since the 1980s. In 1982, 83 per cent of university operating revenue came from government funding. Today, it accounts for only 50 per cent. The federal government's per-student contribution (adjusted for inflation) has dropped from \$3,291 per student in 1992-93 to just \$2,020 per student in 2016-17.

The difference is being made up by tuition increases, corporate donations and contracts, and more precarious work.

Over the past 30 years, tuition fees for university undergraduates have doubled, even after accounting for inflation. Compulsory fees have also nearly doubled. Governments provide direct support to students to help with tuition, in the form of grants, loans, scholarships, and tax credits, but much of this funding is poorly targeted or back-ended, with students forced to pay up front and wait for a tax credit or loan forgiveness to come a year – or even years – later.

The loss of federal funding also has significant impacts on the wages, benefits and working conditions of workers, including CUPE members. Precarious work, outsourcing, privatization and corporatization are all on the rise in PSE.

Issues

PRECARIOUS WORK

Declining government funding and an increasingly corporate mindset among PSE administrators have contributed to an increased reliance on precarious forms of employment by universities and colleges.

Research by CUPE shows that 54 per cent of faculty appointments in Canadian universities have been contract, rather than permanent. Part-time, casual or temporary terms of work are also growing in support work as well. In some cases, universities and colleges are using attrition to get around collective agreement language preventing layoffs in order to replace permanent positions with casual and temporary positions.

OUTSOURCING AND PRIVATIZATION

Privatizing or contracting out services is another favourite tactic of administrators. At some institutions,

entire sectors such as food service and custodial services have been contracted out to companies that pay workers very low wages and fail to provide good benefits and pensions. For instance, 75 per cent of Canadian universities and colleges have contracted out their food services.

The extent of privatization includes student instruction. At several universities, private, for-profit colleges offer courses that can be used toward public university degrees. A number of for-profit, private colleges have also signed deals that allow them to offer students a diploma from a publicly-funded college when they complete their studies.

Many CUPE locals are fighting against the contracting out of services currently provided by members. In Ontario CUPE had success in getting contracted out services such as academic support services, food services, cleaning and maintenance brought back in house at several universities.

CORPORATIZATION

The decline in public funding has led many post-secondary institutions to accept corporate donations and contracts that come with strings attached. In some cases, this has even meant control over hiring, firing, research results and academic curriculum. Because of a lack of transparency on the part of many colleges and universities, the public doesn't know whether or not the donor has been given control over employees or academic processes.

Management and administration of universities and colleges is also increasingly corporatized. Appointments to Boards of Governors heavily favour corporate executives. In Ontario, they now outnumber academics and other external appointees. At many schools, the number of senior administrative appointments is expanding, along with their compensation packages.

Pensions

Most university pension plans are employer-sponsored. Most college plans are multi-employer plans established and regulated through provincial legislation. For the most part, these are defined benefit pension plans. Since the 2008 recession, employers have attacked pension plans by cutting benefits and shifting risk to employees, most notably by moving from defined benefit plans to defined contribution or target benefit plans.

Three Ontario universities – University of Guelph, University of Toronto and Queen's University – have established the University Pension Plan (UPP), a joint sponsored, multi-employer pension plan. CUPE staff and local leaders worked to ensure that this new pension plan will continue to provide members with a secure and stable retirement plan. As more universities re-examine their pension arrangements, many other CUPE locals could be involved in discussions with their employers about joining the UPP. CUPE will work with locals to ensure that they have a strong voice in these discussions.

In Newfoundland, Memorial University is moving toward establishing joint sponsorship and joint control of their pension plan.

Bargaining

CUPE continues to face challenging rounds of bargaining due to underfunding in the sector. In Quebec, CUPE 1294 (UQAM) scored a large pay equity victory where it was ruled that the method used by the employer to determine its wage adjustments was insufficient. This victory will have an impact on CUPE members in the entire University of Quebec system.

CUPE has also had some organizing successes in the sector. In Ontario has seen successful unionization drives for contract instructors at University of Toronto

(CUPE 3902) and the University of Ottawa (CUPE 2626). In Quebec, workers at the Student's Society of McGill University joined CUPE and created Local 5447.

Campaigns

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION: OUR TIME TO ACT

After years of government underfunding, access to high-quality post-secondary education is at risk. We need to put post-secondary education on the federal agenda. Through our campaign *Post-Secondary Education: Our Time to Act*, CUPE is calling on the federal government to be a real partner in post-secondary education again.

We are asking the federal government to:

- Adopt a Post-Secondary Education Act with clear conditions and accountability measures for federal funding;
- Create a dedicated Post-Secondary Transfer;
- Increase transfer funding by 40 per cent to restore the level of per-student PSE funding that was provided in 1993;
- Work with the provinces to reduce and eventually eliminate tuition fees for post-secondary education.

ALLIES

CUPE and our coalition partners have long advocated for affordable and accessible public post-secondary education for students in well-funded colleges and universities. Our main long-time partners in this struggle are students represented by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) and faculty union members represented by the Canadian Association of University Teachers.

Many CUPE locals regularly work with student unions, public interest research groups, women's centres, LGBTQ2+ groups, and other campus-based organizations. Many campuses have regular inter-union meetings

to discuss issues of shared concern – such as pensions, benefits, contracting out and other bargaining issues.

Other research institutes and groups that support our issues include the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the Broadbent Institute, federal and provincial New Democratic parties, the Canadian Labour Congress and provincial federations of labour.

THE FUTURE

Canada's post-secondary institutions have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of 2020 campuses across the country closed, nearly all instruction was moved online, and research activities have been severely curtailed. Support staff in food services, maintenance, operations, libraries, and custodial services have been redeployed, furloughed, or laid off. Contract instructors have had their contracts for summer and fall courses cancelled. International students have had to choose between staying in Canada without economic support, or returning home, potentially unable to return to Canada for some time.

CUPE is working with its allies in the sector to ensure that the measures are taken to protect students, faculty and campus workers do not open the door for the long-term replacement of in-person instruction with online learning. Through the CCPA's Alternative Federal Budget, CUPE is calling on the Federal Government to implement a post-COVID recovery plan that includes significant measures to ensure the health and safety of students and workers, financial protections for workers who are laid off, furloughed or facing reduced hours, and international students have access to income supports, grants and loans.

The long-term vision for this recovery plan is a post-secondary system, funded by provincial and federal governments, that is free for all students who qualify. A just transition to a post-COVID world will require retraining for unemployed Canadians, especially in sectors that will not return to pre-COVID

levels of employment. It will require a transition to less environmentally damaging sectors, and it will require equal access to higher education for communities that have been historically disadvantaged.

To achieve this, we must keep building coalitions with students, other unions and community groups, and stay united in the struggle for affordable, high quality, public post-secondary education provided by public employees who are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.