

Opinions from Students

Will There Be a Student Strike?

An Opinion article by Andrew MacPherson

In the past week we have heard the idea of a National Student Strike over proposed changes to the post-secondary education system put forward by Lloyd Axworthy, minister of Human Resources Development. This strike was proposed by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), a national organization of over 70 student associations including the UPEI Student Union. In the following paragraphs I would like to outline why this strike may be necessary, when it may held, and finally, the procedure through which it can be determined whether or not UPEI will participate.

One thing we should be proud of as Canadians is that we have a fairly accessible education system. Tuition fees at universities average around \$2500 across Canada, whether you're at UPEI or U of T. This is a very different situation from that of our southern neighbour, where some private institutions charge over \$20,000. While our current system is not perfect, it is universally accessible.

The changes proposed by Mr. Axworthy threaten to change the very essence of Canadian post-secondary education, and are the biggest cuts to education funding in the history of our country. The government is looking at cutting the \$2.6 billion in cash transfers it currently gives the provincial governments to be allocated toward post-secondary education. With provincial governments unable or unwilling to make up the shortfall, this could mean that as much as 40% of the operating budget of universities could disappear entirely.

The result of this would undoubtedly be

a drastic rise in the cost of tuition. Numbers like 145% have been tossed around. This would mean that tuition in 1997 could be over \$6000; however, the government has a great plan to counteract this. They're going to loan us even more money to pay for university. Isn't

this a great idea? I hope politicians and bureaucrats aren't too surprised if students aren't incredibly thrilled. The idea of taking the federal government's deficit and transferring it onto the backs of students to the extent of \$30,000-\$40,000 each doesn't seem much like reducing the deficit--it's simply transferring it onto the individuals. The

question is: can students afford to take on any more debt? Default rates for student loans are presently at about 10%, and that's only for a \$15,000-\$20,000 loan maximum.

Another facet of this is that the loans will be repayable on an income-contingent basis after graduation. This means that if you get a job you will pay a portion of your income back to the government. If you do not get a job right after graduation, you don't start paying until you do. Sounds not too bad at first, but consider the fact that this allows tuition to keep on rising because more and more money is available. Considering the huge loans people

will have to pay back, they will not be able to build as many houses or buy as many cars or even put as much money away for their children's education. Given that university graduates are the largest contributors to the economy, this could have dire effects on the future. The

phrase 'mortgaging the future to pay for the debts of the past' has been thrown around.

So there's the why. Now for the when. Some people have suggested that this national strike, if it does indeed take place, should happen during the consultation period happening this fall. I'm not sure if

I'm inclined to agree with this because this period of time should be spent in discussion, not making shows of force. We must use this consultation period as a chance to make our voices heard as loudly as possible, but we also have to listen. If after the consultation the government does not listen to our concerns, then shows of solidarity such as a general student walkout should be considered. At that point we would have something to protest against. Right now all we have is a discussion paper, and if we are not willing to discuss this issue then ultimately we won't be heard--no matter how many strikes we have.

Given that, I can't see having a strike

until late in the spring semester, or even in fall of 1995. This gives the opportunity for reconsideration, but is not too late to change opinions before changes to the post-secondary education system are adopted by the government.

In the meantime we should look for alternatives which would still allow us to be heard in the process. When the task force on social policy reform visits Charlottetown, we need to get students out to show their concerns so that this issue does not get buried under changes to the UI system. Other ideas include writing and visiting your MP, public protests, a mass petition signed by students, and other initiatives should begin immediately. A general strike should be our last alternative.

For UPEI students to participate in a national walkout, we would obviously need to hear the opinion of students. Before representatives from the UPEI Student Union would vote on this issue at a CFS meeting, there would have to be a plebiscite or large poll to see if students here are interested. This is an initiative which could only be a success if begun at the grass-roots level. Neither a national chair of CFS nor a president of the UPEI Student Union order this to take place.

I encourage everyone to do their best to find out about these proposed changes and voice what you would like to see in the post-secondary education system. Don't forget your vote is just as important as that of a seasonal worker or someone collecting U. Make sure the government realizes it too.

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Easter addresses reform proposals

No guarantees for students

By Cate Hanus and Mike Beagan

UPEI STUDENT UNION PRESIDENT Andrew MacPherson seemed to be the only participant aware of student concerns during the October 13 meeting called by Wayne Easter to discuss Lloyd Axworthy's social reform proposals. Mr. Easter spoke at length but conveyed little apart from his lack of knowledge on the subject and a desire for feedback from universities. He seemed relatively uncon-

cerned with students' views.

In his summary of Axworthy's discussion paper, Mr. Easter barely touched on education, saying there was very little in the paper to draw from. He quickly moved on to other issues without addressing major student concerns such as cost and quality of education.

Transfer payments are slowly decreasing and may disappear completely over the

course of the next decade. Replacing federal transfers for education would put upward pressure on tuition fees. Axworthy's proposals to offset this include increased student loans and improved savings investment vehicles.

Unemployment Insurance was the main topic of discussion, and seemed to be the only thing Easter was willing to talk about at any length. UI is a major source of income on PEI,

and many people at the meeting were opposed to changes in the UI system.

The discussion ended with many questions left unanswered. No one present seemed to fully understand the situation, and remain much to be discussed. Many issues need to be addressed before any of Axworthy's proposals changes should be made law.