

# Counterpoint

## **PENSION PUSHBACK IN ALBERTA AND QUEBEC**

## **THE (UN) FAIR ELECTIONS ACT**

**Focus:  
Post-secondary  
education and the  
real costs for  
students**

**Building better  
communities –  
A fair funding  
toolkit for Canada's  
cities and towns**

KEEPSAKE POSTER  
ON POST-SECONDARY  
EDUCATION



*“Often, the municipal budget process only gives us numbers – not the positive outcomes of that spending. Let’s start at the other end, with what our communities need, and then talk about how we get there.”*

*Katrina Miller, author of Building better communities toolkit P.6*

# Alberta pension cuts halted – for now

Legislation that put at risk the retirement security of hundreds of thousands of Albertans has been sidelined by the provincial government – for now.

After months of stubborn insistence that drastic cuts to public sector pension plans were necessary, Alberta’s finance minister announced Bills 9 and 10 would be sent to a committee of MLAs for further study and public hearings rather than be passed

during the spring sitting of the Legislature.

CUPE Alberta President Marle Roberts credits front line public employees for calling, emailing and visiting offices of MLAs in an effort to slow down the legislation.

“From the beginning, we told the government changes to pension plans should be negotiated, not legislated,” said Roberts. “CUPE members took up that call and made their

voices heard.”

The bills, if passed, would have undermined the retirement security of hundreds of thousands of Albertans by allowing the conversion of modest, stable defined-benefit pensions to less-stable ones. The bills would have also allowed employers to target benefits already earned, reduce early retirement, and remove guaranteed indexing of pension benefits.

In addition to introducing Bill 9, which gutted the pension plans of CUPE members who are front line public sector workers, the government surprised observers by introducing

Bill 10, which allowed private sector employers to unilaterally convert defined-benefit plans to ‘target’ plans – reducing security for pensioners.

Since pension legislation was added to the government’s agenda in September, thousands of Albertans have educated themselves on the issues, visited their MLAs, written letters to Premiers Redford and Hancock, signed petitions, and protested at the Legislature and across the province.

Alberta workers and retirees found allies like Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi and the Alberta

Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, who opposed the changes.

Roberts said she was pleased the Alberta government announced public hearings into the pension changes.

“Negotiation would be better,” said Roberts. “But hopefully this is the start of a more respectful process, one that builds retirement security instead of tearing it down.”

And if the government is just delaying the cuts? Well, CUPE members have memorized the phone numbers and email addresses of their local MLAs.

■ Lou Arab

## Striking Naramata workers feel the support

CUPE 608 President Brianne Hillson talked about how important the support of CUPE and other unions was to the small group of striking workers at the United Church Naramata Centre at a rally for the workers in late May.

Paul Faoro, CUPE BC Secretary-Treasurer, pledged support to the striking CUPE members who he said were dealing with the effects of very poor management combined with a financially struggling facility. Faoro suggested that the Naramata Centre Board of Directors consider contracting out management rather than its front line workers. CUPE 608 members at the United Church Naramata Centre provide a wide range of services to keep the guest accommodation facility running year-round. The 30 unionized employees began a full strike on May 15.

■ CUPE.CA



Over 2,000 people, including hundreds of CUPE members from across Alberta, braved wind chills of -35°C to protest imposed pension cuts. Two months later, the Conservative government blinked.

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# The (un) fair elections act – finding the silver lining in opposition



It's tempting for progressives to throw up their hands in the course of a majority Conservative government. You could make the argument that Stephen Harper has enough votes to pass whatever legislation he wants and there's no point in doing anything about it until we get a chance to give him the boot. That might be true, but only if you measure success by the outcome of votes.

The most recent battle over Stephen Harper's unfair elections act is a good case in point. It was a perfectly terrible piece of legislation, progressives fought it tooth and nail,

and it passed anyway. So were the many months of opposition a huge waste of time?

Hardly.

Let's look at how the drama played out:

The Conservatives introduced the *(un) fair elections act* and repeatedly scoffed at making any changes to it.

In response, a broad range of allies got together to fight back. Among them were the NDP, Council of Canadians, Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), Leadnow, trade unions, human rights and civil liberties groups, anti-poverty and social justice groups and more. The

petitions, online campaigns, newspaper articles, media interviews and rallies raged on for months.

The result? Harper gave in.

The government was determined to pass its terrible legislation exactly as originally introduced, but because of public pressure (read: our organizing efforts), the government backed down on some of the worst elements of the bill.

On its own that can be considered a decent silver lining. But there's more. The organizing efforts brought together and strengthened the ties between many groups and activists. More

importantly, it allowed progressive organizations to reach and engage millions of Canadians through social media, email, local newspapers, radio, television appearances, etc. These are the relationships that will be critical when it's really time to show Harper the door in 2015.

And there's the added bonus of reminding a majority government that just because they can do something, it doesn't mean they'll get away with it.

So, did we lose the final vote? Yes.

Was the fight worth it? You better believe it.

■ **Riccardo Filippone**

## Solidarity – key to victory for Trent food service workers

Faced with a new company taking over food service operations at Trent University, 80 food service workers from CUPE 3205 were served with concessions by their new employer, Compass Group. The company is a giant in the food industry and their position at bargaining was designed to gut the collective agreement and break the union and the workers' spirit.

Concessions included drastic wage cuts, benefit reductions, loss of service, cuts to full-time staff and a host of other takeaways, eliminating rights the workers had achieved over 25 years. They fought back by building solidarity among their membership, with labour groups on campus and with the university community and asking Trent University to urge Compass Group to treat their workers fairly.

"The support we received from CUPE, other unions, faculty, academic workers, students and the larger community was amazing," said Judie Gates, president of CUPE 3205. "We expected a seamless transition from our new employer, as promised by Trent, instead Compass served us a long concessions menu and we immediately reached out to our union and staged a community campaign to fight off a big company."

This fight-back by CUPE 3205 shows what can be achieved no matter how big or how small your local is, when you build solidarity.

■ **James Chai**

**NATIONAL PRESIDENT PAUL MOIST**

## Let's rethink child care – there is a better way

Summer is here again, and many of our sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, have ended another school year. Even though the summer school break is time to plan for family vacations, workers across Canada will also have to manage with increased pressures to find quality and affordable child care.

As Conservatives work to erode our social safety net, today's young mothers and fathers have to work harder and longer than past generations, often struggling to just get by.

CUPE members know that too many families are stuck with no access to decent child care. And we know that it doesn't have to be this way. That is why we've been working with a coalition of unions and child care advocates to get child care back on the national agenda.

The *Let's rethink child care* is a multi-year campaign

with the goal of finding a better way for child care in Canada. The first phase has focused on encouraging Canadians to host kitchen table conversations with their families, neighbours and fellow community members to share stories and make connections. As the conversation and connections grow, we hope to inspire Canadians in finding a better way to ensure all families have access to quality and affordable child care.

We're also hoping these connections will grow stronger as we approach the 2015 federal election. Child care isn't just essential for families, but it is also extremely important for our country's economy.

Quality, affordable child care enables parents to get the education and training they need to get good jobs. It's time our federal government fully recognize that investing in quality child care, and early learning, will increase employment, reduce poverty, and stimulate the economy for all Canadians.

So over the next few months while enjoying this much anticipated summer, please consider talking about this issue in your community. At a family barbeque, the campground, fairs and festivals, any time is a good time for Canadians to discuss a better way for child care.

I hope you all have a safe and enjoyable summer.

**RETHINKCHILDCARE.CA**

**PAUL MOIST ONLINE**  [twitter.com/CUPENatPres](https://twitter.com/CUPENatPres)





# FOCUS:

## POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION



### AN EDUCATION IN INFLATION

THE COST OF A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN CANADA HAS RISEN **DRAMATICALLY** SINCE 1990. **HAS EVERYTHING ELSE?**



TUITION FEES HAS GONE UP

# 352%



THE MINIMUM WAGE HAS GONE UP

# 98%

Source: CCPA



THE COST OF GROCERIES HAS GONE UP

# 61%



THE COST OF RENT HAS GONE UP

# 41%

### It's not academic – call centre model prompts concerns about lowering standards at Athabasca University

Athabasca University is one of Canada's largest distant education institutions. The university is moving from a 'tutor model' where students have one academic expert on call for all their questions – to a 'call centre' model – where students hear a new voice every time they call.

"Athabasca University is devaluing its programs and damaging its reputation by pushing a call centre model for their courses. This leads to a reduced standard of learning for courses that go beyond right and wrong answers," said Ronnie Joy Leah, spokesperson for CUPE 3911.

Members of CUPE 3911

have launched the website – **PROTECTLEARNING.ATAU.CA** – and they are asking members of the University community and the public at large to demand better academic standards.

Imagine taking a class where you never get to meet your teacher, and every time you ask for help, you get a new person answering your question. Imagine that the person who marked your essay is different from the person who marked your last test, who is also different from the person who answered your question about the material (who is different from the person who answered your previous question about the material) and who is differ-

ent from the person who explains why you got the final mark you did.

That's a scenario facing students at Athabasca. And it's no picnic for the staff either. Athabasca University tutors have been paid per block of students but are now being asked to engage in piece work – clocking every interaction with students down to the minute – and billing only for the precise, reported times worked.

The website – **PROTECTLEARNING.ATAU.CA** includes an e-postcard which, with a few mouse clicks, can be sent to university officials and provincial government representatives.

■ Lou Arab



### PROFILE SUPRIYA SYAL

## Collective action at the U of T

*Solidarity, like knowledge, knows no borders. Case in point is CUPE 3902's Supriya Syal, whose connections to collective action began in India, and continues to this day at the University of Toronto.*

"I came from a sort of a union family, and I've always been excited by the idea of collective action," says Supriya. Now a post-doctoral fellow at U of T, Supriya is the Chair

of CUPE 3902's Unit 5, which is now trying to reach its first collective agreement with the university.

"We're a newly formed unit, and in my role, I represent post-doctoral fellows within the larger mandate of the local, as well ensuring that members are represented in their dealings with the employer," she says.

As well, Supriya sits on the unit's bargaining committee, in addition to her post-doctoral research work in the fields of psychology and neuroscience. "The post-doctoral context is a

very special niche within the university setting," says Supriya.

"There has been a fair bit of recent commentary in academia about the postdoctoral experience, how it is lengthening, how we are creating many more PhDs than academic jobs. What does it say about us as a society, that we pay the pittance of an amount we do to people who've earned the highest scholarly degree possible and are devoting their lives to research? I think the fact that the postdocs decided to unionize, was part of this



dialogue - part of the idea that a better life has to be possible," she says.

Between her post-doctoral work, trying to negotiate a first contract with U of T and her other duties as Chair of CUPE 3902's post-doctoral unit, there aren't many opportunities for outside interests. Even so, Supriya and her partner do their best to carve out a little time to enjoy the many sights, sounds, smells and tastes that make Toronto one of the most interesting cities to live in.

"It's gotten progressively harder, but we do enjoy spending time at some of the great beaches here".

■ Kevin Wilson



“High tuition fees and the prevalence of loan-based student financial assistance have pushed student debt in Canada to historic levels.”

Jessica McCormick, Canadian Federation of Students

## What I will always remember about university— my crippling debt!



**A**t graduations across Canada, this twitter message from a UBC Student using the UBC hashtag # I will always remember UBC for... reflects the truth for so many new graduates this year. The UBC student tweeted I will always remember UBC for my crippling debt.

The average Canadian student debt is estimated to be around \$27,000. “High tuition fees and the prevalence of loan-based student financial assistance have pushed student debt in Canada to historic levels,” said Jessica McCormick from the Canadian Federation of Students. “From skyrocketing tuition fees and high student debt to high youth unemployment and a shrinking middle class, this may very well be the first generation that’s worse off than the one that came before it.”

Data assembled by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), demonstrates that students have to work longer to pay for university than they did a generation ago, but it varies greatly by province.

The most affordable place to study is Newfoundland

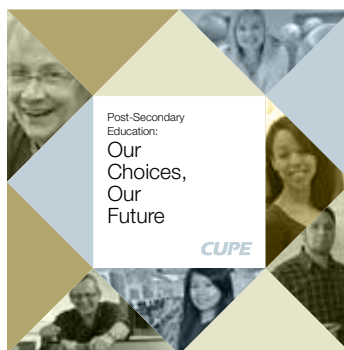
and Labrador where a student only has to work about a week more at minimum-wage than they would have in 1975 to pay for average full-time undergraduate university tuition fees. Ontario has become the most expensive place to study, and is home to the largest number of university undergrads. It takes at least twice the hours of minimum-wage work to cover tuition compared to a generation ago.

“What this indicates is a shifting of priorities: as public money is withdrawn, and public support is reallocated to after-the-fact assistance (through tax credits or loans forgiveness), the cost of higher education is being downloaded onto students and their families,” said Erica Shaker from the CCPA, “yet, international research conclusively demonstrates that we all benefit exponentially from living in a well-educated society. As a result we should share the costs by making the post-secondary system more and not less equitable, in addition to making it publicly accountable, high quality, and affordable.”

Funding education

through student debt is an unfair model. Requiring low-and middle-income students to finance their education through debt results in students with loans paying more for education than students who have the resources to pay the full cost of their education up-front. Students who can pay their fees up-front only pay the sticker price, while students who take on debt must pay both the fees and the accumulated interest on their loans.

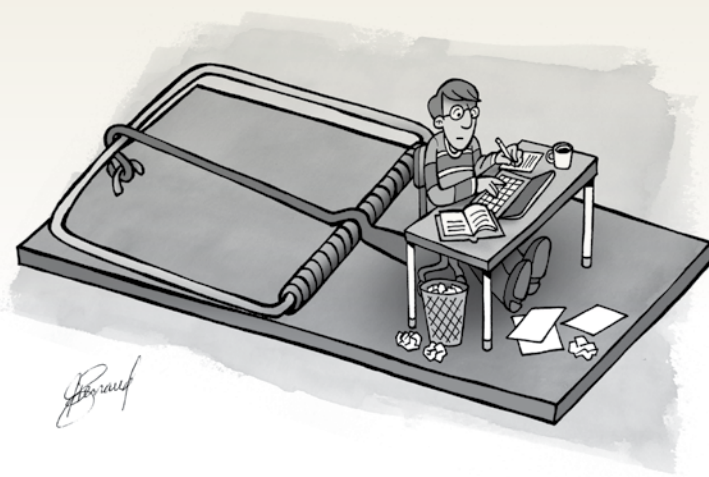
“What today’s students are looking for isn’t a hand-out or a free ride,” said McCormick. “What this generation wants and needs is the same support and tools for success that were enjoyed by youth of the previous generation. If we can’t fulfill even these most basic promises then we have truly failed, not just this generation, but generations to come.”



CUPE is committed to establishing national criteria and conditions for the funding of post-secondary education programs. We want to ensure the quality and accessibility to public post-secondary education. Read about CUPE’s positions in our booklet, *Post-Secondary Education – our Choices, our Future.*

■ Margot Young

## Têtes-à-têtes!



## CUPE fights fees in Manitoba, and wins

Members of CUPE 3909 at the University of Manitoba were shocked when they first learned that the University was planning to increase graduate student continuing fees by a whopping 350 per cent. CUPE 3909 represents over 2,000 teaching assistants, graders, instructors, and librarians at the university, many of whom are also currently graduate students. “Many graduate students finance their degrees by working part time on campus,” said Ana Vialard Hart, President of CUPE 3909. “The fee increase would have undermined their work dollar-for-dollar.”

The local immediately launched into action, sending out a news release, as well as a callout to members condemning the university’s plans. Other on-campus groups, such as the Graduate Students’ Association held forums, and planned a rally in opposition of the massive fee hikes.

Because of the immediate outcry presented by members and allies, the Manitoba Minister of Education stepped in, and halted the university’s plans.

“We are pleased that this government understands the impact this fee hike would have had on our members, and the student body as a whole,” said Kelly Moist, President of CUPE Manitoba. “Because of the quick response of our membership, the fee hike was defeated within a week of its announcement.”

CUPE 3909 is on the front line of defending affordable public post-secondary education in Manitoba, and while the battle rages on, we’ll count this as a major win.

■ David Jacks



# CUPE launches fair funding toolkit at national municipal meeting

The need for new and fairer ways to fund municipalities was a key conversation at this year's national conference of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities

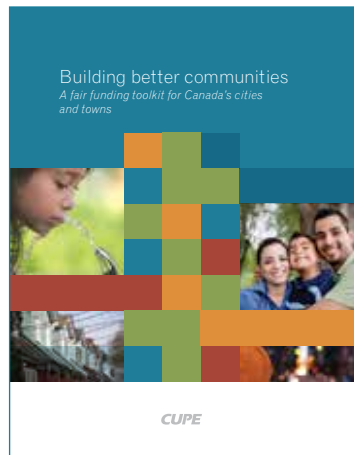
CUPE helped spark the much-needed discussion with a new guide advocating for municipalities to have access to progressive revenue sources. *Building better communities: A fair funding toolkit for cities and towns* looks at the state of municipal revenues, and offers insight into new and fairer sources.

A well-attended CUPE workshop launched the tool with Canadian municipal leaders gathered in Niagara Falls for the conference.

"The need is urgent. It's crucial for our social and economic health that new funding sources shift costs fairly onto those who can most afford to pay," said CUPE National President Paul Moist, during the workshop.

"Unlike other countries,

our municipal governments are forced to rely heavily on property taxes and user fees. This is unfair, and inadequate," said Moist. "These regressive taxes mean lower-income earners pay a higher share than



Big challenges face municipalities of every size, driving pressures on infrastructure and services.



**Downloading**  
Federal and provincial governments have downloaded responsibilities without enough funding to deliver the services.



**Growing and aging population**  
A growing and aging population means increased demand for public services.



**Climate change**  
Destructive storms, rising temperatures and flooding mean more damage to local infrastructure.



**Growing income gap**  
The growing gap between rich and poor threatens communities' social and economic stability.

Learn how we can better fund municipalities, to build fair and sustainable communities.

those with higher incomes, contributing to income inequality."

"We need a balanced approach, with greater sources of municipal revenue-generating tools," said Newfoundland's Centreville-Wareham-Trinity Mayor Churence Rogers, a panelist at the workshop.

Rogers, who is also president of Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador, is helping spearhead a provincial campaign for a new municipal fiscal framework that looks at several revenue sources, including a share of provincial income tax.

"Sharing one per cent of

the provincial income tax would significantly increase predictable, sustainable revenues – something that's desperately needed," said Rogers.

Advocating for more and better municipal revenues is also about broadening the conversation.

**THE NEED IS URGENT. IT'S CRUCIAL FOR OUR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HEALTH THAT NEW FUNDING SOURCES SHIFT COSTS FAIRLY ONTO THOSE WHO CAN MOST AFFORD TO PAY.**

"Often, the municipal budget process only gives us numbers – not the positive outcomes of that spending. Let's start at the other end, with what our communities need, and then talk about how we get there," said workshop panelist and toolkit author Katrina Miller.

"We need to build budget literacy, so people can

decode the budget, so they can support spending on universal public services. Because they will support it," said Miller, a researcher and community organizer with Toronto-based Public Interest. Linking taxes directly with what they pay for is a powerful antidote to the right-wing call for tax cuts and freezes.

"If we're going to tackle inequality, municipal spending is a critical part of the puzzle.

For every tax dollar spent on social programs and infrastructure, we get more than twice the return of a dollar spent on tax cuts," said panelist Diana Gibson, president of Canadians for Tax Fairness. "We need to reframe taxes from being a burden, to being a bargain."

Gibson is the co-author of a research paper on fair municipal revenues that CUPE will publish in the coming months.

The toolkit looks at various revenue tools, evaluating each for its fairness, impact on local finances, and ease of use. *Building better communities: A fair funding toolkit for cities and towns* is available at [CUPE.CA/COMMUNITIES](http://CUPE.CA/COMMUNITIES)

■ Karin Jordan

## in brief

### Saskatchewan hospital laundry system not for sale

Participants at CUPE Saskatchewan Summer School held a lunch time rally on the one year anniversary of the announcement that the Saskatchewan government was going to privatize the entire hospital laundry system. A 10-year contract was awarded to K-Bro Linen Systems, an Alberta based for-profit company. All regional laundry facilities will be closed and approximately 400 CUPE members will lose their jobs. CUPE is fighting to protect these workers, and to keep all aspects of health care delivery public.

■ Tria Donaldson



### BC Solidarity with teachers

CUPE BC President Mark Hancock (4<sup>th</sup> from left) joined CUPE 379 members and executive on a picket line in Burnaby in support of B.C.'s striking teachers. Teachers began rotating strikes in May. CUPE education support members began bargaining in June with the same employer with funding of education a priority, after more than a decade of chronic underfunding.

■ Janet Szliske



### Settlement in 10-month Bonfield strike

A settlement was reached in the 10-month long dispute between the Township of Bonfield and CUPE 4616-2.

"We worked really hard to reach a deal that both we and the Township can live with," said Diane Francœur, spokesperson for the striking workers. "Ultimately, we were able to push all the major concessions off the table. Equally crucially, the five workers who were terminated by Mayor McLaren during the strike have been reinstated."

"The Bonfield workers who held the line for ten months in this defensive strike have been a source of inspiration for all of CUPE," said Paul Moist CUPE National President. Moist visited the strikers on their picket line, and led fundraising efforts for them.

"Bonfield members showed courage during a difficult strike. They were never alone on the picket line as CUPE members demonstrated their solidarity by raising funds to help support them. At the CUPE Ontario convention \$42,000 was raised and at the CUPE Newfoundland and Labrador convention an additional \$5,650 was raised. For our part, CUPE National will match the money raised," said CUPE National Secretary-Treasurer Charles Fleury.

The Bonfield workers received tremendous support from CUPE locals across the country. "It was a long, hard winter, and the support of those locals was essential to our ability to stay strong for ten months," said Francœur.

■ Andrea Addario





## More than 10,000 gather in front of the National Assembly to protect pension plans

**M**ore than 10,000 members of the *Coalition syndicale pour la libre négociation* (union coalition for free negotiation) demonstrated in front of the National Assembly, in Quebec in May. The slogans read “negotiating works” and “negotiation, not confrontation!” Their goal is to convince the Quebec government to respect the negotiation process put in place for municipal employees’ pension plans. These white-collar workers, blue-collar workers, firefighters, police officers, and public transit workers emphasized that their unions are going above and beyond and that

negotiations are giving good results.

“Coalition members came out in full force from across Quebec to send a clear message to Premier Couillard and Minister Moreau: Let us negotiate, we deliver the goods, we never fail to find solutions. Whether it is to regulate past services or to share past and future deficits, a binding law would undermine negotiations and jeopardize labour relations,” said Marc Ranger, CUPE assistant regional director and spokesperson for the coalition.

“Municipal unions are extremely involved and responsible when it comes to pension plans. They prove

it on a weekly basis. For example, recently Quebec City’s blue-collar workers made major efforts to consolidate their plan. There’s absolutely no need for this bulldozer law because negotiations were working, even in Quebec City,” said Ranger.

The coalition was launched on March 20 under the theme “**Negotiation, not confrontation!**” and is 65,000 members strong. It represents the vast majority of unionized municipal workers in Quebec. The coalition categorically opposes any bill that compromises the fundamental right to free negotiations for pension plans.

■ Lisa Djvahirdjian

## CUPE locals in Cape Breton launch ‘Worst pothole’ contest

Imagine a Canadian city where no major road paving jobs have taken place for the last two years. Now imagine it’s also in a region known for having one of the harshest climates in the country. That’s exactly what’s happening in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM), and what has prompted the union representing municipal workers there to launch a ‘Worst Pothole’ contest.

To enter the contest Cape Bretoners need to visit [FACEBOOK.COM/CBRMPOTHOLE](https://www.facebook.com/CBRMPOTHOLE) and ‘Like’ or ‘Share’ the page, then share a picture of the worst pothole. They could win an iPad Mini for their efforts.

CBRM are outside workers with CUPE 759, inside workers with CUPE 933 and crossing guards with CUPE 761.

■ John McCracken



### NATIONAL SECRETARY-TREASURER CHARLES FLEURY

## We have the financial resources to continue to invest in our people

**C**UPE is still growing and so is our operating budget. With our \$178 million budget for 2014, we will be meeting all of our financial obligations. But with an increase in per capita revenue of only 0.8 per cent or \$1.4 million this year, making the 2014 budget was a real challenge.

There is an economic reality that we could not ignore. For the first time in many years, we ended 2013 with an operating deficit. And the factors contributing to the slower rate of revenue growth remain.

First, as collective agreements expired following the 2008 financial crash, negotiations have taken place in a climate of austerity. And, we are seeing lots of zeros or very small wage increases.

Secondly, even if our membership continues to grow, almost all of that growth is among part-time, casual and temporary workers.

Finally, we are seeing a turnover in our membership. A wave of retirements means new members coming into the union are paid at the low end of the wage scale.

In that financial context, we had to make important choices for the future of our union

Indeed, some of the factors outlined above are good for our union. For instance, we should be organizing part-time and casual workers. This is why we budget resources to help strengthen and expand our membership.

CUPE is presently training our regional reps to be able to provide pension resources to locals all across Canada. This will pay off at the bargaining tables.

Nationally there is also a political battle brewing that we must win: the 2015 federal election. Through the Fairness project, and having conversations with our members we will get rid of this anti-union government and its austerity agenda.

CHARLES FLEURY ONLINE  [twitter.com/CUPENatSec](https://twitter.com/CUPENatSec)





AVERAGE  
CANADIAN STUDENT  
DEBT  
\$27,000.

CUPE.CA/POST-SECONDARY-EDUCATION

