

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



CUPE represents 70,400 members in 233 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.

Around 390,000 people work in universities, colleges, vocational and trade institutions in Canada. Of those, about 43,000 are full-time university faculty members outside CUPE's jurisdiction.

CUPE is a major union in universities, representing approximately 25 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 \$2,007 per student in 2015-16.

The difference is being made up by tuition increases, corporate donations and control, 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.

Students are feeling the squeeze. Average student debt upon graduation is approximately \$27,000, and default rates are high. Every year, more than one in 10 students with a Canada Student Loan default on their loans. Over the past five years, the federal government has spent more than a billion dollars writing off student debt that could not be collected.

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 for the past decade, 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.

CUPE has been able to achieve some protection for casual workers. At Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, CUPE 3205 successfully bargained the replacement of part-time food service jobs with full-time jobs with guaranteed hours. Similarly, at the University of Guelph, CUPE 1334 was able to obtain regular full-time positions for 39 temporary custodians through collective bargaining and a mobilization campaign.

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.

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.

At the University of Saskatchewan, CUPE 1975 is facing an employer that is threatening major unilateral changes to the pension plan, including an abandonment of the defined benefit nature of the plan. The local is standing up for their pension and their right to negotiate changes to the pension plan.



There have been some recent victories for CUPE members. At the University of Prince Edward Island, the employer proposed significant cuts to the pension plan in early 2016. After months of mobilizing in solidarity with the other unions on campus, CUPE 1870 achieved a joint sponsorship deal that resulted in no changes to pension benefits and a clear process for any changes to be made in the future.

CUPE 2424 at Carleton University in Ottawa went on strike for four weeks in March 2018 to protect their pension plan when the employer tried to remove language protecting pension contributions from the collective agreement. In a big victory for CUPE 2424, the strike resulted in even stronger language around pension rights – and the defined benefit nature of the pension plan was added to the collective agreement!

In BC, CUPE 3338 and its partners on the Employees' Joint Pension Committee successfully reached an agreement to secure pension benefits at Simon Fraser University in June 2018. This victory was the fruit of four years of hard work educating and mobilizing – plus a Labour Relations Board ruling that found Simon Fraser University was negotiating in bad faith.

Bargaining

There have been some very difficult rounds of bargaining in the post-secondary sector, as CUPE members have faced concessionary demands from employers. At York University, CUPE 3903 was on strike for over four months in early 2018, the longest post-secondary strike in Canadian history. After the employer refused to bargain, the new Conservative government of Doug Ford legislated CUPE 3903 back to work.

However, CUPE has also had some organizing successes in the sector. Members of CUPE 5262 at the Fondation de l'UQAM in Quebec ratified their first collective agreement in July 2018. And at the University of Regina, postdoctoral fellows and non-student researchers will be negotiating their first collective agreement after being certified in August 2018.

ALLIES

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.

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.



THE FUTURE

Governments in other countries are making the choice to invest in post-secondary education. Canada can make that choice, too. We can restore proper funding to our post-secondary institutions and relieve the financial pressures that contribute to precarious employment and corporatization. We can provide free post-secondary education to our students, as governments in 20 other countries, including Brazil, Germany, and Sweden, already do.

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.

VISIT CUPE.CA: RESOURCES FOR MEMBERS

- More information for your sector
- Tools to help you and your local
- Success stories from across the country
- And more!