

## IN THIS ISSUE

- **Alberta Government's Anti-Social Budget Met with Strong Resistance**
- **Alberta Budget Shows What Conservative Sweep in Alberta Truly Means**
  - *Peggy Morton* -
  - **Resist United Conservative Party Budget Attacks on Post-Secondary Education**
    - *Dougal MacDonald* -
  - **Response from the Unions**

## **Alberta Government's Anti-Social Budget Met with Strong Resistance** **Budget Shows What Conservative Sweep Truly Means**

- *Peggy Morton* -



Rally at Alberta Legislature, October 18, 2019, opposes Bill 9 and condemns the cuts expected in the budget.

The fighting spirit of Alberta workers is evident for all to see despite attempts of the ruling class to say otherwise. Attempts to portray the working people as those who love the policies of Jason Kenney are a figment of a self-serving narrative. The truth of the matter is quite different and can be seen in the resistance to the Kenney government's assault on public services and the workers and

professionals who deliver them. This was expressed across the province as Finance Minister Trevor Toews on October 24 delivered the first budget since the United Conservative Party (UCP) was elected in April.

During the federal election campaign, Jason Kenney criss-crossed Canada stumping for Andrew Scheer and the federal Conservatives. From New Brunswick to Ontario to Alberta, he pitched the line that a Conservative government would make life more affordable for Canadians with the slogan “It’s time for you to get ahead.” Not a week later, and Kenney was back at the Alberta Legislature as the United Conservative Party government brought down its first budget. The budget is evidence of what his promises to make life more affordable mean, or his provincial election slogans of jobs and economic prosperity. They are a vicious anti-social assault on the rights of Albertans to public services and the rights of the workers who deliver them.



Claiming the budget is about “surgical cuts,” not a matter of slashing across the board, the Kenney government went all out to portray the budget as nothing like the ones experienced during the Klein years. Much was made of the claim that the cuts were only 2.8 per cent over four years, and that health care and education were not included. That deception was swiftly uncovered by the unions and concerned organizations which pointed to the government’s own fiscal tables which show that inflation and population growth over the next four years in Alberta will total 18.1 per cent. This means any sector which the government claims is not being cut in fact receives an 18.1 per cent reduction. By this account, K-12 education budgets would be cut by over 20 per cent, post-secondary budgets by about 30 per cent.

The government also made it clear that it will use dictate and not negotiations, saying that there will be no wage increases for public sector workers for the next four years. Public sector workers have not received any wage increase for two to five years depending on the sector. These attacks on the right to wages, benefits and working conditions acceptable to those who provide the services according to their needs are unconscionable. The workers will not accept them.

Kenney gave a short televised address the night before the budget in which he tried to cover up his anti-social assault using the pitch that Albertans are all hunkering down in their western fortress to do battle with the rest of Canada. Albertans can’t count on Ottawa, he said, so they have to be self-reliant and get their own house in order. Apparently no one told Kenney about the large number of workers at the Legislature last week chanting “Whose House? Our House.”

Besides anything else, what Kenney is suggesting is the farthest thing from self-reliance possible. Successive governments have refused to use the tremendous wealth created by the working people to develop an all-sided self-reliant economy without boom and bust. They stubbornly insist that all decisions about the economy should be left to the energy oligarchs who must be provided even more pay-the-rich schemes.

Where have the billions of dollars from the hard work of Alberta working people gone so that now the government claims it must carry out its wrecking? Its anti-social offensive wrecks the public education system; freezes the meagre incomes of people with severe disabilities; refuses to provide the necessary health care and seniors’ care; attacks post-secondary education by slashing budgets,

increasing student debt and making post-secondary education even more unaffordable; and much more.

Public sector workers are already facing unsustainable workloads without the staffing levels and resources they need to provide care and services. These workers are precious to society. They do their duty and take up their responsibilities day in and day out. They are not “things” to be subjected to “surgical cuts,” or tossed aside.

The government states that 3.5 per cent of the budget goes to pay the interest on the debt. As an interim measure, a temporary moratorium could be placed on the interest payments while an investigation is carried out to determine who benefitted from the pay-the-rich schemes that left the province in debt. The government says Albertans cannot rely on boom and bust, but insists that there is no alternative to handing over even more to the energy oligarchs with the tired old claim that some of this will trickle down.

What the “Conservative sweep” in Alberta really means is that the workers are deprived of political power. Modern arrangements are needed which serve the interests of the working people and not those of the rich. Working people have their own interests and claims on society as the producers of wealth and those who keep society functioning. These claims are just. This is what their resistance to the anti-social offensive brings to the fore.

*(Photos: AUPE, RU)*

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## **Resist United Conservative Party Budget Attacks on Post-Secondary Education**

**- Dougal MacDonald -**

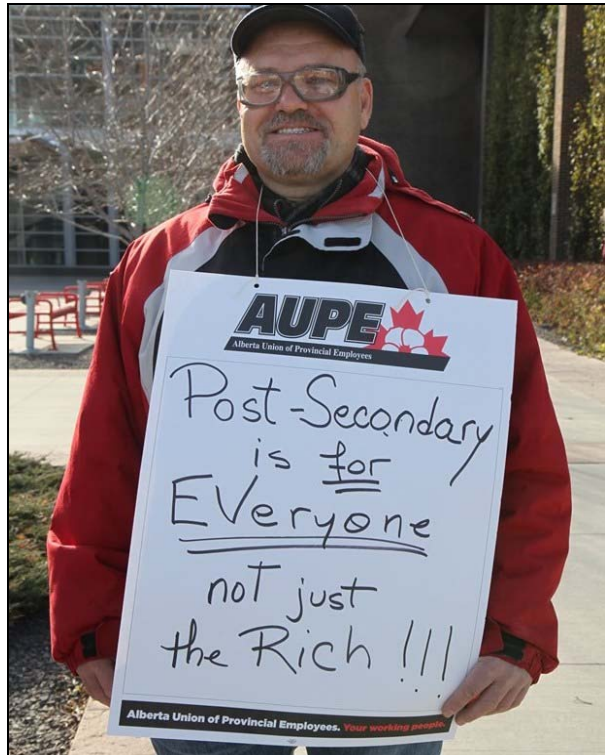
Alberta’s ruling United Conservative Party (UCP) announced its first budget on October 24, claiming it will “tackle out of control spending,” “take care of the most vulnerable,” and “put Albertans back to work.” The budget includes damaging cuts to post-secondary education instead of increased investments, decreasing the total budget from \$5.4 billion to \$5.1 billion for 2019-20, and predicting a further six per cent cut down to \$4.8 billion in 2022-23.

Individual post-secondary institutions will also have their operating grants cut by up to 7.9 per cent, with specific amounts based on each institution’s “financial capacity.” To give one example, the University of Alberta’s Campus Alberta grant will be cut \$44 million (6.9 per cent) in this 2019-20 fiscal year. The University of Alberta Infrastructure Maintenance Program (IMP) funding, which was \$35 million last year, has been reduced to zero this year, even though the university is currently facing \$372 million in deferred maintenance.

As well, the UCP has eliminated the tuition fee freeze brought in by the previous government creating increased financial hardship for students. Post-secondary institutions will now be permitted to increase student fees seven per cent each year over the next three years, up to a maximum of 21 per cent by the 2022-23 academic year. Student loan interest rates are rising from prime to prime plus one percentage point; the Bank of Canada sets the prime rate, which currently is 3.95 per cent. The province is also ending education and tuition tax credits in the 2020 tax year. Average student debt in Canada is currently about \$26,000.

Like Premier Doug Ford in Ontario, the UCP plans to tie funding for universities to how many students graduate and how many get jobs. This once again underlines that the UCP's conception of post-secondary education boils down to providing free training to fulfil the narrow aims of the monopolies that control the economy, including the training of neo-liberal ideologues to perpetuate the status quo. Thirty-five U.S. states already give financial rewards to post-secondary institutions that meet pre-set government goals.

Workers in post-secondary education will be negatively affected by the cuts. In fact, the budget states there will be 764 fewer post-secondary jobs by March 2020. Actual staff cuts have already begun, with 26 support workers just fired at the University of Calgary. One union representative said support staff at the university are already suffering burnout and "losing more is going to hurt them and students as well." As is well known, these staff's working conditions are students' learning conditions.



Unfortunately, some post-secondary upper administrators are simply caving in to the provincial government. For example, University of Alberta President David Turpin has already committed the university to making internal cuts because of the expected funding reductions by the government. However, this lack of resistance is not surprising since on August 16 the UCP replaced the chairs of all the Boards of Governors of Alberta's universities, colleges and technical institutes with corporate executives, e.g., the new board chair of Calgary's Mount Royal University is the CEO of oilsands monopoly Cenovus.

Education is a right that all people have by virtue of being human. It is not some kind of privilege conferred by Jason Kenney and his ilk. The UCP budget cuts to post-secondary education are an attack on the right to education but the people are saying *No!* to the attacks and *No!* to making universities the handservants of the monopolies. Instead, they are asserting that we need a society that provides rights with a guarantee, including the right to education, because we need enlightened and educated people who will open a path forward for the progress of society.

*(Photo: AUPE)*

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## Response from the Unions

Unions representing Alberta's public service workers and professionals and concerned organizations condemned the provincial government's budget. The response shattered any illusions created by the ruling circles that the working people of Alberta concur with anti-social measures. Public sector workers have great experience based on a long history of taking up their responsibility as the first line of defence of public services and they called for resistance to this broad assault of the Kenney government.



**Picket at Southern Alberta Institute of Technology against anti-social budget cuts, Calgary, October 24, 2019.**

## Alberta Union of Provincial Employees

“The things we do for Albertans are too important to let a government just chop away at them. It is our responsibility as those workers and the unions that represent [you] to stand up and fight for what is right, which is services for the people of Alberta and jobs where people like you are respected for the hard work you do every day,” said Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) President Guy Smith in a message to union members. “Now the reality is hitting, and it is time we all pulled together, make sure we support each other and stand strong for the people of this province,” he added.

AUPE organized two pickets on budget day to express their determination to defend their rights and public services. Workers at Children’s Services, Region 6 (at Rundle Centre, Edmonton) were joined by other members of the AUPE and workers from other unions to express their determination to fight back against the government’s attack on jobs and on the services they deliver to the public. In Calgary, more than 100 AUPE members and allies held a militant picket at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology to protest budget cuts.



**Post-budget information picket at Rundle Centre, Edmonton, October 24, 2019.**

## Alberta Federation of Labour

“The reality is Kenney is misleading Albertans when he claims he is only cutting 2.8 per cent. With increases in the cost of living and population growth these cuts are much more likely to be around 15 per cent — very close to the level of the Klein cuts in the '90s,” Alberta Federation of Labour President Gil McGowan said.

“Kenney blew a huge hole in the budget with his corporate tax cuts, the \$4.5 billion giveaway to profitable corporations. We’ve seen large corporations like Husky Energy cut hundreds of jobs after receiving a \$233 million gift from the United Conservative Party. Now the most vulnerable Albertans, like people on Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), along with post-secondary students, public sector workers and cities are being asked to pay for these corporate tax giveaways.



“Kenney’s cuts are bad for the economy because to build a strong economy, we need modern infrastructure to keep our businesses moving. And we need top-quality health care and education to build and maintain a healthy, skilled workforce. A strong public sector is a vital part of our economy’s foundation. Premier Kenney’s budget risks tipping Alberta into a self-inflicted ‘Kenney Recession’ that could be worse than the economic crisis caused by the drop in worldwide oil prices,” McGowan said.

## Friends of Medicare

“When a government is not able to provide health care to meet the needs of a growing population, it is a cut,” Sandra Azocar, Executive Director of Friends of Medicare, said. “As one goes down line by line through the budget, what we’re seeing is a decrease in most areas of the health care budget,” she pointed out.

This is to be followed by a three year spending freeze, amounting to a 15 per cent decrease in health care funding over four years. The Alberta Seniors Drug Benefit Program will be cut off for all non-senior dependents, and the government is considering income testing for seniors’ drug benefits, Friends of Medicare pointed out.



“The budget announcements also contain further assaults on the most vulnerable citizens, with Income Support (IS), Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), and Special Needs Assistance programs no longer annually adjusted for inflation,” the organization said.

“To claim that these cuts will have ‘minimal effects’ on people, as the Premier did in his pre-budget address yesterday, ignores and undervalues the importance of the public services on which Albertans rely. [...] We have seen these kinds of cuts before, and we know the impact that they have on our

jobs, our health, and our dignity,” it continued.

“Albertans do not stop needing health care based on whether the economy is down or on an upward trend,” Azocar said. “Public health care and robust public services are not a special interest. They are in the best interest of each and every Albertan, and at the heart of a strong and healthy Alberta.

“The measure of a budget should be not some bogus measure of fiscal health, but rather how it will contribute to human health now and in the future,” Azocar pointed out.

“This is our new reality. Friends of Medicare are calling on this government to make true on their ‘public health care guarantee’ and to move away from the understaffing, underfunding and under-resourcing of an essential public service. Albertans want to see a more responsive public health care system, and that can only be achieved by improving and expanding our current system, not by seeking private, for-profit solutions,” Friends of Medicare said.

### **Alberta Teachers’ Association**

The Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) was also quick to express its opposition to the budget. ATA president Jason Schilling says that teachers will not be able to fill the gaps created by today’s provincial budget. “This budget is, yet again, asking teachers to do more with less. The student population is expected to grow by 15,000 students, and school boards will not receive any more money to support them.”

“The government is playing a shell game in order to trick us into thinking enrollment growth is being funded, but at the end of the day, school boards have less funding per student, which means larger classes, fewer supports for students and programming cuts.”

K-12 education funding is actually being cut by two per cent in the current year, Schilling said. He added that cuts imposed by this budget will be felt by students in the classroom and, as a result, some will fall through the cracks.

“Class composition will continue to be a big problem and one-on-one attention suffers as a result,” Schilling said.

*(Photos: RU, AUPE, AFL, Friends of Medicare)*

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