

INTRODUCING THE CONSERVATIVE ATTACK-OCTOPUS

Doug Ford's Ontario government has begun to implement a series of far-reaching measures to rapidly reconfigure the province's public services and social welfare system. Informed by a combination of free-market economics and far-right populism, the Ontario Conservatives have unlocked the ideological tool chest and started brandishing the austerity sledgehammer at any public good thought to be associated with progressive politics and the left in general.

While labour unions will inevitably be subjected to the wild swinging of the wild-eyed, Trump-lite populist protégé, the current assault is being levied at the health care and education systems. In particular, the Conservative government's targeted reconfiguration of the tuition and loans framework has broad implications for educational affordability, public access, democratic participation, and student organizing.

Under the previous Wynne framework for tuition and OSAP, there was a chance for students to receive up to a full 100 percent grant instead of loans through the OSAP system. While this was not, by any means, true free tuition, it was a heavily utilized program that aided low and middle income students.

Obviously, such redistributive funding was not to our millionaire premier's liking and so, we are now faced with changes that include:

- reducing the family income threshold for student eligibility for Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) funding;
- eliminating the six-month interest-free grace period for student loans repayment upon graduation;
- increasing the number of years one must be out of high school to qualify to be a mature student; and
- targeting the ancillary fee structure – otherwise known as the levy system – that supports a wide range of student services and groups on campus.

Of course, the sugary bribe to make all this bitter medicine go down is the 10 percent tuition cut for domestic undergraduate students. This is simply a distraction from the long-term costs degrading OSAP and student groups will have.

Beginning in June, all postsecondary institutions in the province are mandated to include as part of the registration process an opt-in feature for all 'non-essential' ancillary fees. These are fees that students had previously voted on funding. Of course, that doesn't matter to Ford. To him, consumeristic choice is more important than democratic mandates.

This will deeply affect student associations (and their service centres and clubs), campus media (radio stations and newspapers), and other non-profit organizations on campus that provide a wide variety of student-run services to students. These organizations will hemorrhage funding and many will likely be forced to shut down.

Of course this is no accident. It's the very goal of the Ford Conservatives. For decades Conservatives in Ontario (and beyond) have decried the work that student unions, campus media, and progressive groups like the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) and the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) carry out on campus.

These groups organize students, facilitate social justice activism, and broaden students' perspectives – helping them develop non-academic skills and enriching the academic experience as a whole. These activities are what Doug Ford referred to as "crazy Marxist nonsense" in a February fundraising email to party members, which attacked the idea of union membership in general: "Students were forced into unions and forced to pay for those unions... I think we all know what kind of crazy Marxist nonsense student unions get up to. So, we fixed that. Student union fees are now opt-in."

Having failed time and time again at the campus ballot box to defund groups like OPIRG and the CFS, Ontario Conservatives believe that they have finally figured out a way once and for all to kill student unionism and student activism on Ontario campuses – the bureaucratic sledgehammer. They plan to directly change of ministry policy through the Ontario's Tuition Fee Framework, without the oversight of the legislature – and are about to do more damage to student organizing than years of failed attacks.

In this article, we want to further unpack the Student Choice Initiative (SCI) by analyzing it when measured beside the restructuring to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), then examine a similar model that was rolled out in Australia and New Zealand, hone in on implications for campus media and student democracy in Ontario, and focus on the potential impacts for Carleton University in a post-SCI landscape.

**CARLETON'S "NON-ESSENTIAL" FEE STRUCTURE**

In late January, 82 students associations representing over 13 million students across Canada signed and issued a letter to Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities Merrilee Fullerton. The letter condemned the Student Choice Initiative as an attack on student democracy, since students have already chosen through referendums to fund student associations and various campus groups.

The associations likened the model to allowing voters to opt-out of paying taxes to police services or libraries. They demanded the initiative be reversed until proper consultation is undertaken.

The letter also highlighted the potential loss of thousands of jobs across Ontario. At Carleton, for example, the Graduate Students' Association (GSA) and the undergraduate Carleton University Students' Association (CUSA) employ over 350 people.

The Ford government's plan to restructure the ancillary fee framework is not only a false choice, but a staunchly political one. Under the proposal, only around 10 percent of all undergraduate student fees will be made optional.

During the 2018-2019 academic year, Carleton undergraduate students paid \$1,105.01 in fees. Under the new model, \$126.54 will be optional. Similarly, graduate students paid \$1,325.08 in fees in 2018-2019. Under the new model, only \$237.02 will be optional, representing around 20 percent.

**THE MANY PITFALLS OF THE NEW OSAP**

With the January announcement of changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Plan, further details have slowly been released by government officials, organizations like OPIRG, and direct reports from students.

**THE DIRECT CUTS TO OSAP**

The OSAP of Fall 2019 will be a minefield of new restrictions on access, as touched on earlier. Other OSAP changes include:

- Second degree students – including graduate students in general and second-degree college students – will be required to take on a loan that is worth fifty percent of their total OSAP funds.
- There will also be no scenario where students receive a full OSAP grant to cover all university or college costs.

All these additional caveats and cuts to OSAP double the pressure on students, creating a situation where students are disincentivized from taking up any additional fees and desperate to save anywhere they can.

Austerity makes the rhetoric of the Student Choice Initiative seem even more appealing, since there is less support for students in general under this new framework.

**THE QUIET TRANSFORMATION OF OSAP GRANTS**

Students have more to worry about than simple reductions to OSAP grants – they are also faced with the outright transformation of grants to loans.

There is an under-reported hum about this on social media platforms across Ontario. Students are finding their OSAP grants from previous years have been converted without warning into loans in the current year – all before changes to the grant system are supposed to come into effect.

As noted in the terms and conditions of the Master Student Financial Assistance Agreement (MFSAA-Ontario), as of 2017, there are only three conditions under which students could be faced with grants being transformed into loans "on a date determined under the MTCUA [Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Act]":

A. you cease to be enrolled in an Approved Program of Study at an Approved Institution or cease taking the Minimum Required Course Load within thirty days following the first day of your Study Period

B. your circumstances or the circumstances of your Expected Contributors change resulting in a determination that you are no longer eligible to receive an Ontario Student Grant or you are not entitled to the amount of the grant issued previously to you, or

C. the Minister cannot, to his or her satisfaction, verify with the Canada Revenue Agency or through other means the financial information reported by you or your Expected Contributors

There have been numerous reports of student receiving notices that portions of their OSAP grants were being clawed back without specific reference to these three clauses – and, again, ahead of any forthcoming changes to OSAP.

Are the Conservatives somehow engaging in tougher enforcement of this existing agreement? Are they otherwise leaning into some of the more ambiguous language? Government officials have also remained silent on the matter and refuse to acknowledge that the conversions are occurring at all.

With the changes made to OSAP by recent government announcements, we can expect the release of a new MFSAA-Ontario, which will govern individuals terms and conditions for both grants and loans. We can probably expect draconian measures – look what they're accomplishing with the current agreement!

And again, this change adds to the economic pressures on students reviewing their expenses, adding to the growing pile of disincentives for students to opt-in for student organizations and services. That is, if they really even have a choice.

**STUDENT CHOICE AND OSAP**

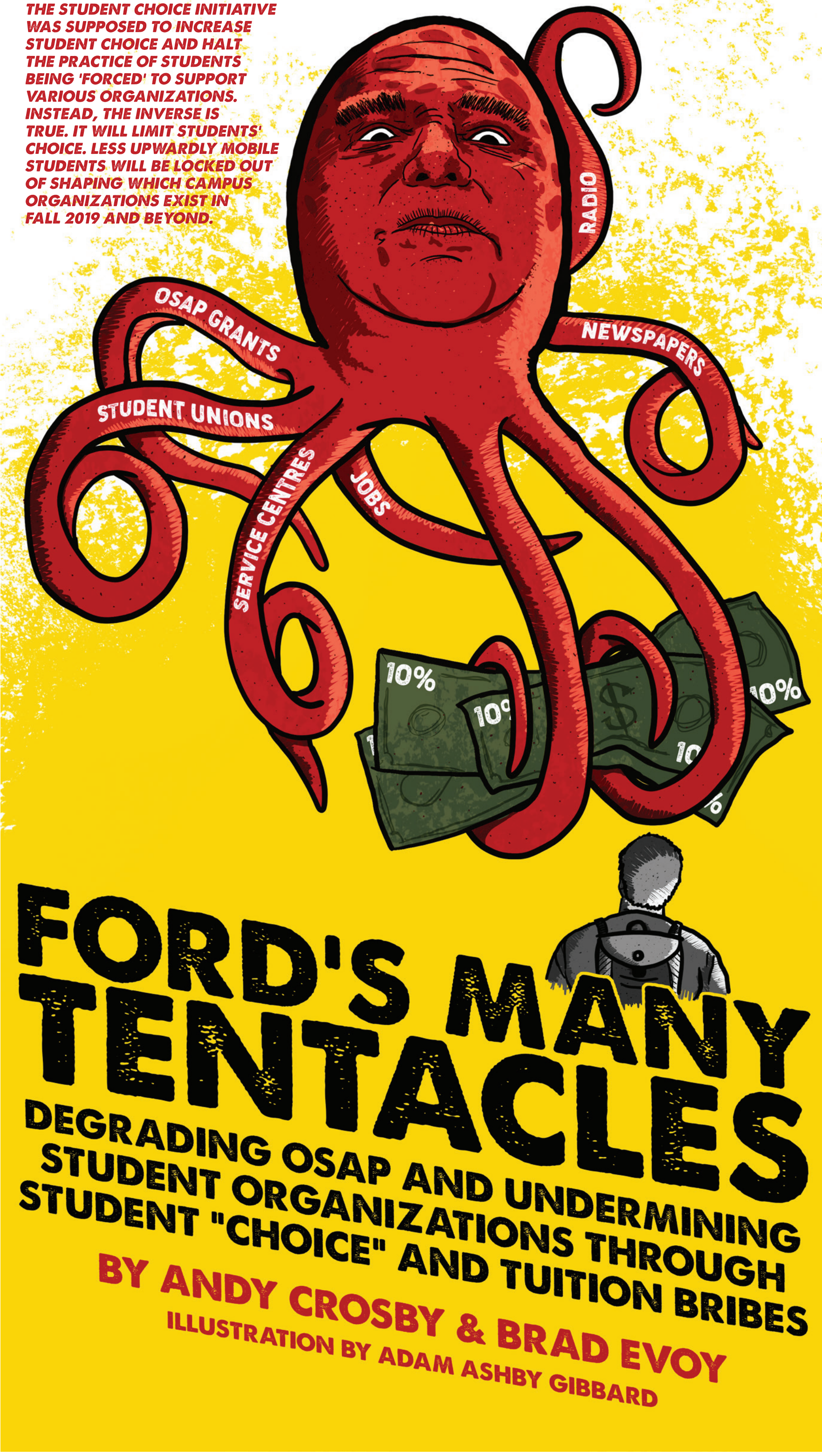
As revealed through phone conversations between OPIRG and both front-line and executive figures within OSAP's departmental structure, it appears those fees impacted by the Student Choice Initiative will not be covered by OSAP.

We managed to speak about this with Maria Mellas – who boasts the astonishingly baroque job title of Director (Acting), Student Financial Assistance Branch, Advanced Education Learner Supports Division at the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities.

Mellas stated that existing policy regarding OSAP coverage of optional fees would apply to these newly-optional fees. In other words, all optional fees are not covered by OSAP – and this now includes SCI-impacted fees, ranging from student unions to newspapers to independent student-run offices of all kinds.

While this is a clear and direct response to the issues at play, OSAP attempted to obfuscate the issues at hand when the matter was raised repeatedly on their general line. The frontline bureaucrats who answer the phone shifted from a clear answer of 'no' to a more vague request for members of the public to wait for the release of the budget, only to be later contradicted by Mellas.

THE STUDENT CHOICE INITIATIVE WAS SUPPOSED TO INCREASE STUDENT CHOICE AND HALT THE PRACTICE OF STUDENTS BEING 'FORCED' TO SUPPORT VARIOUS ORGANIZATIONS. INSTEAD, THE INVERSE IS TRUE. IT WILL LIMIT STUDENTS' CHOICE. LESS UPWARDLY MOBILE STUDENTS WILL BE LOCKED OUT OF SHAPING WHICH CAMPUS ORGANIZATIONS EXIST IN FALL 2019 AND BEYOND.



Moreover, when speaking to Mellas, we were astounded by her seeming lack of understanding of what the Student Choice Initiative even is. It seems that this government's proverbial left and right hand simply do not know what the other is doing.

In spite of repeated requests for clarification on the government's position on this issue, Minister Fullerton has not responded nor given any suggestion that there will be a change to existing ministerial, branch, or departmental policies governing OSAP.

In itself, applying this existing OSAP policy of non-coverage of optional fees to campus radio and student unions fees, for example, might not seem to be a big deal. However, the impact is wide ranging for low-income students.

It has been estimated that approximately 60% of students rely on OSAP grants and loans for payment of all post-secondary institution fees, including tuition and ancillary fees. As such, when less financially liquid students are faced with the prospect of paying for various additional fees out of pocket, one can imagine the choice they will be forced to make.

In essence, the reality of all three of these areas of changes to OSAP – the various cuts to the program, the quiet grant conversions, and the lack of coverage of SCI fees – contradicts two key talking points of the Conservative government on this issue.

First, the SCI was trumpeted as a measure that put money back in the pockets of students. Yet in reality students will actually be getting a further decrease in OSAP funds, since the government is skipping out on ancillary fees.

Second, the SCI was supposed to increase student choice and halt the practice of students being 'forced' to support various organizations. Instead, the inverse is true. The SCI will limit students' choice. Less upwardly mobile students will be locked out of shaping which campus organizations exist in Fall 2019 and beyond.

Combined with the other OSAP changes, students are being heavily disincentivized to take on any other costs financially. This can only lead to reductions in financial capacity for student organizations themselves.

Interestingly, we have seen this scenario play out in other jurisdictions – namely Australia and New Zealand.

**HOW DID 'VOLUNTARY STUDENT UNIONISM' TURN OUT IN AUSTRALIA?**

In December 2005, the Australian parliament passed the Higher Education (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill. The complete end of compulsory student fees entirely came into effect less than a month later, in January.

This implementation of so-called Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) was done by making the collection of student organization fees by universities essentially illegal. As in our new Ontario system, student organizations could still convince students to sign up for memberships, but they could no longer rely on any fees being collected by their institutions. In fact agreements to do so were now illegal. (That's the Orwellian language of conservatives for you – making a choice illegal and calling it 'voluntary'.)

While this level of direct attack on student fees is not at play in Ontario, the impacts will most certainly be instructive. While collecting fees for student organizations remains legal here, students are being severely disincentivized from paying.

From January 2006 until the replacement of the Higher Education Bill in 2011, full VSU was in effect in Australia. These were six years of immense austerity on university campuses, heretofore unseen in the world of student organizing.

The Howard Government of Australia shared the Ford Government's notable animus against student organizing. According to the Australian Centre for Policy Development in 2005:

"The debate surrounding voluntary student unionism (VSU) is emotionally charged – due as much to the personal vendettas of senior Liberals against the leftist student organizations they invariably lost elections to in the 1970s and 1980s as the passionate protests of student organizations. VSU is not only about furthering the free market and individualistic philosophy of the Howard Government but also severely limiting student organizations as political entities."

Much like the Ford Government's "crazy Marxist" framing of student institutions, Howard's Australian reforms aimed to undermine the power of student organizations to engage with civil society organizing and challenges to state power.

The impact of this legislation in Australia also brought about critical changes to campus life that may well be echoed in Ontario.

As noted in 2011 by the President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations John Nowakowski, VSU was "a major factor in the complete collapse of student organisations in rural and regional universities, particularly postgraduate organisations."

The resultant organizational mergers resulted in graduate students losing their autonomy and funding, and without these factors, students disengage," Nowakowski explained.

In 2007, the National Union of Students (Australia) released a report assessing of the impact of just the first full year of VSU and recounting the dire consequences of the new legislation.

First, they noted that "workers jobs have been the biggest victims of the Coalition and Family First's VSU legislation. 25 out of 30 student organisations reported substantial or total job losses."

Second, while some student organizations noted support for their academic advocacy services from their universities, by 2007 "at least six universities no longer operated student rights advocacy through a student controlled body."

This extended to many student run services. The wide collapse of student-run spaces was immediate and harsh. Student services were generally taken over by university or private contractors and 13 out of 18 organisations reported 'substantial or near total cuts to... campaigns, activities, support programs.'

**VOLUNTARY STUDENT MEMBERSHIPS IN NEW ZEALAND**

In New Zealand, Voluntary Student Memberships (VSMs) were implemented in 2011 through the Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Bill. In this case, universities could still charge fees – much like in the Ontario model – but could not fund student organizations directly.

As a workaround, universities often implemented Service Level Agreements and hired contractors – often, the former student organizations themselves – to provide similar services. However, as the New Zealand student newspaper Critic pointed out, this meant that "universities control the funding for their student associations and can cut it at their discretion. In most cases, this meant major cuts to essential services such as counselling and advocacy."

Moreover, other spaces such as student media began to crumble in the years after the implementation of VSM. The 80-year old campus newspaper MASSIVE at Massey University folded. In the case of the Albany Students' Association (ASA), Critic also noted that "Effectively, VSM stripped the ASA of any budget beyond what it might be able to negotiate with Massey directly, but this is very limited in size and scope and has had serious long-term effects on staffing levels and even the ability for us to remain in our offices."

New Zealand had also been faced with changes to their student loan system as early as 1999, which similarly disallowed loans to pay for student fees.

The impacts in New Zealand then echo the Australian experience, with

the added confusion of organizations attempting to scrape by on the benevolence of university administration contracting out duties to those organizations.

This also led to many student organizations' relationships being broken with the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA), the equivalent of the Canadian Federation of Students.

So in both Australia and New Zealand, some student organizations survived – though many often didn't – only by grasping at scraps from their institutions or by transforming their work into a more neoliberal model.

In turn, this is probably what we can expect going forward in Ontario. As surpluses and reserves of existing organizations run dry, what else will be there for organizations to turn to but these limited modes of capitalist reformation or oblivion?

**WHAT ELSE IS THERE?**

We cannot pretend that Ontario student and campus organizations will be immune from the same realities that our colleagues in New Zealand and Australia faced. There will be closures in the future and the loss of jobs on a similar scale.

We may be facing these changes through a differing mechanism, but without significant resistance this is the road which lies inexorably before student and campus organizing in Ontario.

**PATH 1: TOWARDS NEOLIBERAL ORGANIZATION**

Some student organizations will take the neoliberal path and attempt to become corporate-styled service providers, either through contracts with their institution or to keep existing for-profit spaces alive. This may be an easy transition for already service-heavy organizations across Ontario.

But will transforming into university service contractors keep student organizing alive? No. Instead such a transformation would only keep an appearance of organizing alive, under the pretenses of the students-as-consumers model that has already conquered university-run spaces.

**PATH 2: OBLIVION**

In turn, there will be some organizations who opt to ride out the times as they are, without looking to financial stability or changing practices. Some student unions, like the Graduate Student Union at the University of Toronto, are even predicting – without much basis – that they will simply continue to survive with over 60% of their current fees.

These organizations will hurtle towards their end, without properly preparing for any contingency for their members or campus.

But while these two paths have been trod in other jurisdictions, does there yet remain another?

**PATH 3: THE RE-POLITICIZATION OF STUDENT ORGANIZING**

Look at the establishment of the grassroots collective the Ontario Student Action Network and the proposed interventions from existing leftist organizations, ranging from the Revolutionary Student Movement to the International Workers of the World. There is perhaps a growing sense that student political organizing can be separated from wider service structures, with an eye to revitalizing student activism and culture along other lines than that of typical experiences of student life. This would be a form of student life focused around building open, democratic, and fightin student spaces – as a necessity under the Ford regime – and not just to build on existing organizations projects, or services.

While this cannot replace the decimated existing structures of student organizations and the losses of services, supports, and spaces which we are going to face, perhaps the longer-term fightback against this new policy and the Ford Government has only just begun?