

University of Toronto Students' Union

12 Hart House Circle
Toronto, ON, M5S 3J9

media@utsu.ca

416-978-4911

STATEMENT

For immediate release

October 26, 2016

RE: UTSU Involvement in Fight the Fees

The Canadian Federation of Students, of which the UTSU is a member, is currently running a nationwide campaign called “Fight the Fees.” The campaign calls for 1) the total elimination of tuition fees, for 2) the replacement of student loans with student grants, and for 3) all existing student loans to be made interest-free. The other four CFS locals at the University of Toronto have been active in Fight the Fees for some time, we have not yet taken a public stance. We would therefore like to explain our position on Fight the Fees, and on the forthcoming Student Day of Action. While we have objections to both, we do not see them as wholly without merit.

First, some background:

The cost of an Arts and Science degree at U of T is already much higher than the provincial average. The university can—and always does—raise arts and science fees by 3% each year. If that cap of 3% is raised -- it expires in January 2017 -- the annual increases will hit U of T students harder than they will students at other, less expensive universities, especially given the high cost of living in Toronto. We also need to consider that many of our members do not pay Arts and Science fees at all. We have members studying in architecture, commerce, computer science, dentistry, engineering, law, medicine, nursing, and pharmacy who pay more than arts and science fees and face tuition increases of 5% per year. For context, there are only two other CFS unions/locals in Ontario that represent both law students and medical students. In short, our members generally pay higher fees than do the members of most other locals. As a result, the Tuition Fee Framework and the fee increase caps are a more immediate concern for us than they are for locals at which everyone or almost everyone is paying Arts and Science fees.

Our principal objection to Fight the Fees is that it is deliberately silent on the expiration of the current Tuition Fee Framework. While we understand that the CFS is seeking student-led consultations on the new framework, we would like the CFS to take a more visible interest in the possibility of tuition fees increasing more rapidly than they currently do. The demand for consultations will not be presented publicly until the Student Day of Action at the beginning of November, well after the provincial budget process has begun. We are concerned that this timeline is unrealistic, and that the framework will ultimately

be drafted with little to no input from students. What the CFS has conveyed to our Board of Directors is that, because the CFS is committed to the total elimination of tuition fees, debating the rate at which tuition fees increase is counter-productive or, at the very least, a distraction. There was also the suggestion that the fee increase caps are somehow distant from the lived realities of Ontario students. We disagree.

We would prefer that the CFS focus on the Tuition Fee Framework as opposed to on another non-specific campaign for the abolition of tuition fees. In this respect, Fight the Fees seems to favour restating CFS policy over addressing the specific and varied problems students face across the province. The campaign appears to be driven by the needs of “students” as a province-wide collective when it should be focusing on regional issues and standing in solidarity with all students but especially those in regions which are most affected. Students living in Toronto pay some of the highest fees in the most expensive city in the province - the CFS shouldn't be silent on this fact. We strongly feel that the CFS' tuition campaign should be driven by the needs of the students who are and will continue to be hit the hardest by progressively higher fees including U of T Students. The mechanism that allows the fees to increase is just as important as the fees themselves.

Finally, it is widely believed that students in professional programs come from privileged backgrounds—this is false. Undergraduate professional programs like commerce, computer science, and engineering are disproportionately racialized, and it is not the case that students in these programs are guaranteed a high-paying job as soon as they graduate (this is another myth). If there is a concern that students in professional programs are already privileged and thus do not need the support of the CFS, it is misplaced.

The broader point is that U of T is a large, research-oriented university with many professional programs. Students at the other universities in that category—including those at McGill, Queen's, UBC, and Western—are, for the most part, not represented in the CFS. As a result, the organization's agenda is set by students at smaller, more numerous colleges and universities. To be clear, these smaller institutions are in no way less deserving of the Federation's resources. Rather, we would like the Federation to demonstrate just as much interest in the needs of students at universities like U of T, even if there are fewer of them represented by the CFS.

However, there is no doubt that Fight the Fees and the Student Day of Action will raise awareness of the state of post-secondary education in Ontario. Twenty years ago, 19% of university budgets came from tuition fees—the rest came from public funding. Now, it is 51%. We, like the CFS, want to see this trend reversed. We will be lobbying the government for a fairer Tuition Fee Framework, and this independent lobbying will be our first priority. To this end, we will be holding a Week of Action from Monday, 31 October to Friday, 4 November. The week will consist of lobbying, public meetings, and an awareness campaign. This is the strategy that is, in our view, most likely to achieve progress for full-time undergraduate U of T students.

Still, there is value in supporting Fight the Fees as well. The goal of the student movement is barrier-free access to education. We seek to further this goal by pursuing narrower, policy-based goals that complement the broader goal. In short, while we

disagree with much of Fight the Fees, we do not disagree with the principles that animate the campaign.

Student leaders need to be smarter. We question the wisdom of a national campaign that does not properly account for how each province differs. We question whether it is truly progressive to demand that even the very rich pay nothing for their educations. Is the National Day of Action a good thing? Yes. Is it the way forward to deal with the very real issues students are experiencing now? The answer is “no.”

Yours in service,

The UTSU Executive

Jasmine Wong Denike
President

Mathias Memmel
Vice-President Internal

Cassandra Williams
Vice-President University Affairs

Lucinda Qu
Vice-President External

Farah Noori
Vice-President Equity

Shahin Imtiaz
Vice-President Campus Life

Ryan Gomes
Vice-President Professional Faculties

Please direct all questions to: media@utsu.ca