Students call for tuition decrease in upcoming budget

By SARAH HUNT

Students from St. Thomas University and the University of New Brunswick addressed Finance Minister Blaine Higgs at the pre-budget consultations in Fredericton on January 24th. Our messages - tuition fees must come down. In response, Minister Higgs said students spend most of their money on alcohol and smoking and that we need to learn to live without these things. I lost a lot of respect for Mr. Higgs that night.

Students oppose any budget that will see tax cuts for corporations and the rich while increasing tuition fees for those who can least afford to pay. Minister Higgs has ignored how a tuition fee increase will negatively affect students. This year's budget is set to make the prospect of attaining post-secondary education even more unattainable for the majority of young people in New Brunswick.

More and more jobs require a post-secondary qualification. When tuition fees increase, fewer students pursue post-secondary education and students are forced to leave the province after graduating to pay down mortgage-sized debt loads. With a tuition increase, the New Brunswick government is going to drive away students, who could otherwise be contributing to the province upon graduation through their higher income taxes.

The average debt level of a graduating university student in Atlantic Canada is approximately $37,000, is the Minister planning for low tuition fees and the debt loads of which are going to the upper 24% of the earning population - on the backs of students? This is not responsible fiscal management. St. Thomas University student Alex Green says, “Students are being forced to pay for the financial crisis of New Brunswick, which we did not cause.”

Students are challenging the Minister to seek alternate, more viable solutions to this financial crisis. Turning government debt into student debt won’t solve the problem. This burden should not be one that rests so heavily on the students of New Brunswick.

For more information, Facebook: Occupy Tuition.

Sarah Hunt is a first year criminology student at St. Thomas University.

Two-tiered minimum wage will squeeze more from workers

By CHRIS WALKER

Currently New Brunswick is debating the notion of a two-tiered minimum wage wherein workers earning tips will receive only tips as pay than other workers. The NB Media Co-op interviewed Jason Edwards, a Halifax-based researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, on the implications of minimum wages in Canada, what stimulates their growth/reduction and the function they perform.

Chris Walker: The food service industry is pushing for a two-tiered minimum wage for obvious reasons. How do you respond to the economic argument that this reform will make New Brunswick’s food industry more “competitive” and will reduce unemployment by spurring investment and increasing growth?

Jason Edwards: There are two reasons that these claims should be challenged. The first is that there is no conclusive evidence linking minimum wage increases to unemployment. More accurately, minimum wage increases follow the ebb and flow of the overall economy. Generally, increasing the minimum wage results in more total wages paid to lower wage workers which, in my view, a good thing.

Second, regarding “competitiveness,” it is important to recognize that it is not the minimum wage that is competitive, it is the interests of a particular group of individuals to become synonymous with the interests of society in general. While paying poverty-level wages may put a few hundred extra dollars in the pockets of business owners every month, it also has a seriously detrimental impact on the lives of working families. The thousands of hard-working New Brunswickers who barely make it on low wages are too often forgotten in public conversation that confines being competitive with having the most expedient workforce.

CW: The Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) released a report on minimum wage that argues that a 10 per cent increase in the minimum wage results in the employment of youth and teens by roughly three to six per cent. How do you respond to this claim?

JE: AIMS is a perfect example of the social asymmetry that exists between the ownership class and the working class. A quick glance at their list of donors—mostly big business, banks, and other groups of concentrated capital—makes their political bias quite clear. They work without pause toward justifying and reinforcing the position of many elite.

Advocates of a proposed two-tiered minimum wage system would have low-wage workers even more strapped for cash.

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