

Courage My Friends Podcast Series IX – Episode 3
Crisis or Scandal? The Deliberate Dismantling of Ontario's Public College System

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.

Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

RESH: Over 10,000 layoffs and 650 program closures across Ontario's public colleges... so far. What brought us to this point? How is this a manufactured crisis? What interests are served by the aggressive erosion of what is a shining example of innovative and accessible post-secondary education? And what must we do to save it?

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to this podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

TOMMY (Actor): Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the Courage My Friends Podcast.

RESH: Welcome to episode three, *Crisis or Scandal? The Deliberate Dismantling of Ontario's Public College System*.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

In this episode, we welcome support staff and Support Staff President for the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, Local 418 at St. Lawrence College, Amanda Shaw, Second Vice President of OPSEU Local 415, and full-time faculty at Algonquin College, Martin Lee and member of OPSEU's Part-Time and Sessional Divisional Executive and part-time faculty at George Brown College, Ben McCarthy.

We discuss the mass layoffs and program and campus closures across Ontario's 24 publicly funded colleges, impacts on college workers, students, and wider communities, what this means for the future of public post-secondary education and how what has been publicized as a "crisis" is really a scandal of the deliberate dismantling of the public college system by the Government of Ontario.

Amanda, Martin and Ben, welcome. Thanks so much for joining us.

So let's start with some introductions. Amanda, you are joining us from St. Lawrence College. So tell us about your role.

AMANDA: So I work at St. Lawrence College at the Cornwall campus, which is one of our campuses. We have campuses in Kingston, Brockville and Cornwall. And I'm currently serving as the local president and I'm on my third term. My regular full-time job is an academic planning assistant.

RESH: Thank you And Martin, tell us a bit about yourself.

MARTIN: Yeah. So my name is Martin Lee. I'm a professor of biochemistry at Algonquin College, which is situated in the unceded territory that is otherwise known as Ottawa. Land that was never bought, sold, fought for; just people decided to move in and claim it and create Algonquin College, ironically in that space. So I teach biochemistry. I was also on the, bargaining team for the full-time faculty. And I was also part of the workload task force, which is now the world's largest study of faculty workload.

RESH: Fantastic. And Ben, to you. Tell us a bit about yourself.

BEN: I am a part-time faculty member at George Brown College. I designed and taught courses at the Labour School there. That program has since been closed, along with 650 other closures across the province. And in no small part, as a result of that closure, I've become a lot more engaged with and interested in union work.

RESH: And you're part of the Divisional Executive?

BEN: Yeah. So amidst this flurry of activity, a vote that was cast in 2017 on whether or not a part-time bargaining unit should be certified, that ballot box was finally opened. And turns out 88% of us did want to join OPSEU as a union. And so we formed a Divisional Executive and a bargaining team to begin that project of unionizing about 12 to 15,000 part-time vulnerable and precarious workers.

RESH: All right. So, Amanda, you're Support Staff President at St. Lawrence College, and as we're recording this conversation, full-time support staff across all of Ontario's 24 public colleges are on strike. So what kinds of jobs are we talking about? And what's been happening to those jobs? Why are they on strike?

AMANDA: Across the province, we've lost 10,000 jobs out of the college system because of various things, none the least of which is chronic underfunding from the provincial government. And this isn't specific to Ford's current government. It's been a problem for years, even when Liberals were in power.

But that combined with some policy changes regarding international students, has really put the college system into a crisis mode and shone a light on the chronic underfunding problem.

St. Lawrence College specifically has gone through mass layoffs in this past year. It began with the closing of our Employment Services Centers in Ottawa, Mid Park and Sharbot Lake, and then continued to a barrage of layoffs that impacted everybody

across the college, but some of the key roles that were lost as part of these layoffs were our Student Success Facilitators. So the Student Success Facilitator Team Tri-Campus was cut. Brockville and Cornwall, initially were gonna turn into what they were calling "Learning Centers". That change of name has since been reversed, however, it severely impacted the services.

So Brockville and Cornwall themselves, we lost the Athletics and Student Life officers and gym facilities for students because now we don't have support staff to run those. We lost the student success facilitators. We lost our accessibility advisors, who are the people who work with people who need assistive technologies and different pieces. We lost those roles. But probably one of the most, I'll call it egregious things that came out of that was the closure of our two libraries on the smaller campuses and the replacement of our library techs with vending machines. Yeah, so it's not been wonderful in that regard. And students are definitely feeling the impacts.

We have teams that were cut by 50% or more where that workload still exists on the academic side. We also lost our entire research department. We lost our innovation department. We've had numerous cuts to other different positions across the college.

So support staff, in general, we're lab techs, financial aid officers, student enrollment services officers, accessibility advisors, student success facilitators. It's the academic planning assistants, the academic services clerks. It's basically everybody that supports students both face-to-face and behind with everything but teaching. Because we do have our lab techs as well that are doing it.

So it's been quite a tough year at St. Lawrence College with all of those layoffs. And we're not the only ones. It's happening everywhere. And despite this kind of ongoing crisis and the impacts all of these different colleges, Ford's government announced further cuts to college funding this past summer with the proposed budget moving forward. Which was a bit of a hard pill to swallow, given the crisis currently being faced by post-secondary institutions.

RESH: And again, as you said, this is happening right across all 24 colleges. But your college, I mean, what a microcosm, what an example of what's going on. And Martin, as Amanda just said, the colleges have been in crisis mode for a while, but it's really accelerated in the last year.

And before we get more into the reasons behind this, could you add to this in terms of talking about what the scale of the crisis is?

MARTIN: I'm gonna start if I could, by actually reframing it. We've been using the word "crisis" a lot, right?

And, you know, it's got all the symptoms of being a crisis, it feels like a crisis for us. But it's not a crisis, it's a scandal. What we're actually looking at is a scandal, right?

A crisis is something that happens. A rainfall, you know, it's an act of God.

No, no, this is deliberate and intentional. And the more you see it, the more it becomes clear that this is an active process by the Doug Ford government.

To really put it into context, you have to turn the clock back to when he arrived. So that was in 2018. And colleges had already been underfunded. It was a public service that was viewed a little bit, you know, lower in the ranks and things like healthcare and whatever. It was an easy place for governments to cut.

One of the first things Doug Ford did is he cut student tuition by 10% and he froze it. Which means if anybody right now or any domestic student decides to go to one of our 24 public colleges, the funding that that college will receive is the same as what they would've gotten in 2015.

So think about all the inflation and the COVID crisis, that was an actual crisis. All of that stuff happened. You know, budgets blew up, but colleges continued to get the money that they would've gotten from a student in 2015. Okay. So that sets up what happened.

Now obviously colleges were underfunded a lot, but what happened is it got drastically worse. We know that the Ford government were lobbied to increase access to the education dollar by some of their lobbying groups going in. And in particular, the model that they wanted was what's known as the Australian Model. And I'm not gonna go too deep into that because as a New Zealander, I'm biologically adverse to sort of advertising anything Australian.

RESH: I will be asking you about that later.

MARTIN: We'll get to that. But to be very clear, colleges as of right now are facing about \$2.5 billion missing in their funding, right. And again, just to sort of tie it back to a scandal, it seems that a \$2.5 billion fund called the Skills Development Fund has just been created off to the side with absolutely no oversight. That sort of sets up the situation as of right now.

I also think, just to show you how it's a scandal, not a crisis, bear in mind that the fiscal year, 2023 to 2024, the Ontario Colleges made a billion dollar surplus. That was a B

RESH: Yeah,

MARTIN: for billion. Not an M for million. A B. \$1 billion in surplus. And they made that on the backs of international students. Colleges knew what they were doing.

The worst actor was Conestoga. Conestoga made \$280 million in surplus in that year.

During this manufactured crisis, this scandal, even as colleges right now were claiming to be broke, the last year they made \$550 million in surplus. Now, obviously the horizon looks very different because we're still seeing international numbers drop because of the federal government's response to the uncontrolled numbers of students coming in. But fundamentally, what we are seeing is Ontario underfunding colleges deliberately and intentionally in order to funnel money towards Doug Ford's peers.

RESH: So just to, so to again, you know, talk about the scale of this. So so far, we have seen 10,000 layoffs of workers.

MARTIN: Correct.

RESH: We have seen about, what is it, 650 programs....

AMANDA: programs

RESH: ..That are closed. So, is there particular types of programs or jobs that are being cut or is this right across?

MARTIN: So province-wide, businesses and business programs and hospitality programs in particular seem to be hit. That was a response directly to what the government, the federal government did. So the federal government tried to attach visas towards particularly STEM programs. And as a scientist, I hate it when they do that, because STEM is not the answer to everything. But in particular they attach these visas to these STEM programs.

Another little stat that's worth noting: 1 in 10 Ontarians. 10% of Ontarians have now seen the loss of a campus in their community. 1 in 10. And this morning it was announced that Georgian is also gonna close Orillia and Muskoka. And that's another 0.7% of Ontario's population. A hundred thousand people are now also going to see another closure of a campus in their community.

RESH: So this is just continuing then, right?

MARTIN: It's just continuing.

RESH: It's just continuing.

MARTIN: And there's no end on site.

RESH: So Ben, we've been hearing the message from colleges that all of these cuts are necessary due to, again, they're calling it a crisis resulting from the very real situation of yes, there has been chronic underfunding, provincial cuts to tuition, federal caps on international students that we were relying on to make up for those funding shortfalls. However, OPSEU and as Martin just said, no, this is a

manufactured crisis. And you just published an article *Manufactured Crisis in Ontario Colleges* go more into how this is a manufactured crisis.

BEN: I wanna link back to something Amanda pointed out to answer this question. I teach labour history. One of the courses I teach connects organized, labour to cycles of migration. And North America generally, but Canada specifically will go through these cycles of moral panic around migration. And so we are in the midst of one right now. And we can characterize why this happens and how is a political tactic that's often taken up by the Right. But it was under Justin Trudeau's leadership that this kind of anti-migrant rhetoric began to ramp up. And we see under Bill C-2, particular honing of those instruments that will come down on migrants and refugees to the point where tens of thousands of people who are in the system right now are left in the lurch about their status in this country.

RESH: And just to say Bill C-2 is the Strong Borders Act that's coming in under the Carney government.

BEN: Yes, this is his Canada First response to Trump. but if you look closely at Bill C-2, it rhymes with a good deal of what we're seeing south of the border.

And so this is part of the larger picture because an Auditor General report came out about five years ago that told the colleges, look, you have to be less dependent on international students.

A Blue Ribbon Panel was assembled a couple years afterward in 2023 that pointed to the same thing.

The, C ollege Employer Council and college presidents did nothing to lobby government to better fund the system. Instead, they doubled and tripled down on international student recruitment. And the motivation there is that international students are charged up to four times as much as domestic students are.

Okay. So they produce billions of dollars in surplus with this. Where does that money go? Well, in some cases it seems to go to vanity projects, retooling president's offices at some campuses, building out stadiums, investing in lucrative property.

So this anti-migrant rhetoric that talks about a housing crisis actually connects back to financialized properties. And so we see our institutions becoming a conduit for precisely this financialized accommodation. But we put that on the international students. Who at the same time were happy for what is a world class education. Ontario incidentally does have a world class education that what draws the international students here, but they're being heavily taxed for the privilege.

Part of this is mismanagement. Mismanagement that has to do with managerial bloat. That is to say in the time that I've been teaching, which is 16 years, we've seen ranks and layers of management added.

Working in the college system, I once was able to access my college president and have conversations with her. Now, that is a thing of the past. You cannot speak to your president, you would be obstructed by various assistants and other layers of management.

And despite these warnings from the government. Despite colleges now crying poor, we continue to see salaries that populate the Sunshine List. That is to say, presidents who make 400, 500, \$600,000 a year, which is incidentally more than the Prime Minister makes. And to those salaries, they get attached bonuses of 10, 20, 30%. So there's a question of where these profits, these record-breaking profits have gone.

It's dubious that it is this decline in international enrollment, at least in some of our institutions. Because Ontario colleges serve such a diverse range of communities, it's hard to speak in generalities. But we have seen in the last several years, upticks in domestic programs.

Incidentally, the programs that are being cut are in high demand of domestic students. International students are not going to be a major swathe of your arts programs that are being cut.

AMANDA: On Ben's point just right there. So Loyalist College has an aesthetics, had an aesthetics program that serviced the Belleville area, which as we all know is really high in tourism, et cetera. The enrollment for that program was mostly, if not entirely domestic, and were also single mothers in the area. So the program was giving them an opportunity to have a viable job in a really high tourist area. Loyalist went as far as to refurbish their lab and spend money doing that, and they cut the program.

So it has nothing to do with international students and it'll negatively impact people in that area, single mothers, domestic residents. The programs that they're cutting are not just the ones that are in high demand of international students.

MARTIN: And actually, just to tack onto that, Algonquin College has closed its esthetician and hair-styling programs. And I could be wrong, but my understanding is the nearest campus is St. Lawrence in Kingston, which means that a G8 capital no longer has a public school teaching hairstyling or aesthetics. And the nearest place that a person can go is two and a half hours down the road. So we are now telling students that the million people that occupy the Ottawa region can't study to be an esthetician or a hairstylist.

We also closed our hospitality management, which was well over schedule, right? Just a number of students just queuing up to get into it. Outraged all of the managers of all of the hotels and so on. Just closed. Closed.

BEN: Just to sum up on this. Part of what we're seeing here is a condition of the class dealignment that we're seeing in rural communities. There are social service deserts that are caused by sending students to other locations to be educated.

It's intuitive. If you leave home to go study to be a nurse, if you leave home to go study to be a care worker or a technician, or to work as a trained culinary arts worker, you're not as likely to come home. And so these communities lose valuable trained workers who should be feeding that knowledge and education back into their communities. Then you have communities that don't see themselves being served in that way. And it has negative ramifications that lead to the sort of class dealignment that we're witnessing in this current political media.

RESH: Right. And as was pointed out, this is happening in Ontario, which is one of the economic capitals of this G8 Nation. So it's really not making a lot of sense. But this very much sets the context again for the strike that we're seeing now. But this is not the only strike that we have seen recently within the college system.

Amanda, go a bit more into what are the demands of the striking support staff?

AMANDA: It is about job security. Like we're seeing a hemorrhaging of our members from the system. It's about job security. It's about protecting the jobs in the communities. Much to Ben's point, it's about keeping a viable educational option in the communities and making sure that we're able to meet industry need.

Because when Bill Davis changed the legislation to create the college system for what it was it was supposed to be to have education that was aligned with labour market needs so that people could get good paying jobs in the communities and feed that back into it and help the local economy. If we don't have colleges that exist in those smaller communities, then what's to be said of education?

Cornwall had a huge textiles industry, and we also had a Domtar Paper Mill. And what I've learned over the last little bit is that when Domtar closed, many of the workers from Domtar who were too young to retire ended up getting retrained at St. Lawrence College so that they could reenter the workforce and actually make an income. And we're seeing this hemorrhaging of money.

And from a CEC side, the CEC is trying to erode work-life balance. They're trying to get split-shift language into our collective agreement. They're trying to make it easier for the college to have support staff lose their vacation days. They're also trying to mandate double the hours for on-call for people in our IT and trades departments and all of those different pieces, which is very scary.

CEC'S recent press release indicated that we have protections, for example, for contracting out in our collective agreement.

That is untrue. It is untrue.

And I've lived that in the past year because we had a department that got contracted out to somebody who worked with the college. And if we had protections in our collective agreements against contracting out, we wouldn't be seeing it happening in colleges. Many colleges have their food services contracted out, their security

companies. There's been a lot of rumblings lately about the move towards potentially contracting out IT services and various pieces.

But CEC is trying to paint a public opinion that we do have protections in the collective agreement, and that's factually untrue.

RESH: And the CEC, again, the College Employer Council, which is the government mandated bargaining agent for Ontario colleges, has responded to some of the union demands saying that they're unreasonable, such as no college or campus mergers or closures or staff reductions for three years, no contracting out of services as you're talking about.

So what is the union response to the CEC message on that?

AMANDA: So the information that we've been getting from the bargaining team, because I don't sit on the bargaining team. The messages that we've been getting from our bargaining is that LCBO managed to do it. And as both Martin and Ben pointed out, the money is there, it's just not being spent where it should be.

And when we look at the provincial government and the Skills Development Fund and how much of that fund is being funneled to private institutions, even the government saying that that money isn't there to properly fund these things is not possible. But it also points to a scarier picture, which is are they looking at college campus or college mergers as well as campus closures. Because we are seeing campus closures and it is creating holes in rural communities that have previously had a viable education option in their area.

But we're worried about the scale of that because the letter of understanding that they would like signed seems to have really angered CEC, which speaks to a potentially larger problem coming down the pipe that they just don't want us to know about yet.

RESH: And I just wanna note that today, September 26th, as we're recording this interview, the two sides will be going into mediation. So things could change very quickly or, you know, not at all.

And this is happening in 2025, which is also the 60th anniversary of the Ontario Public College System, which as was mentioned, Bill Davis founded 60 years ago. And he said that this is one of his proudest achievements because it really was an innovative way, a new way of envisioning public post-secondary education. The timing of this is really interesting.

Now, under the Save Our Colleges campaign OPSEU just released the report entitled, and I'm gonna read the whole title, "Dismantling Public Futures: Diverting Training Money from Ontario Colleges Through Ford's Skills Development Fund Endangers the Provincial Economy." We started to talk about this. Let's unpack this more, Martin how and why, why is funding being diverted from the public college

system and what exactly is the Skills Development Fund and how much money are we talking about?

MARTIN: Well, when you ask the question why, I may have to refer to my colleagues who teach in labour and the history of labour and class warfare.

But fundamentally what we know is that as Ford was being elected, he was being heavily lobbied by a group called Ontario 360, a think tank that was directly feeding into Doug Ford's ear. And really what they wanted was that Australia model that I previously alluded to. And again, as a New Zealander, I have to say, anybody who wants anything Australian is out to lunch.

So in Australia they made this direct competition between their public system for colleges and tertiary education and these private entities, right? It's almost exactly what Doug Ford, ended up implementing.

First thing that happened is that he carved off the skills development and skills training from what was previously the Minister of Colleges, Universities, and Skills Development.

So, Skills Development got carved off. So you just had the Minister for Colleges and Universities. And then the package of whatever training and skills went to a different minister. Okay? So that was the first thing he did in 2019.

And in 2020, Doug Ford announced a fund, it's called the Skills Development Fund. And because we love acronyms, we sometimes call it the SDF, to create non-college training avenues for businesses and associations that want to train apprentices. They could apply for money to the Skills Development Fund. There was this application process that very quickly became the purview of lobbyists. And that fund was funded with basically the money that was carved out of the colleges. Right.

So what he created was the slush fund off to the side for a billion dollars while the colleges were being cut.

What we now have is a two and a half billion dollar black box.

OPSEU have uncovered a number of instances where these, you know, friends, mates of Doug Ford and his group, have just gotten millions of dollars to, air quotes, "train people" with absolutely no oversight. Absolutely none.

The people that we know that have gone through it have found that they don't have credentials because they didn't come through a college. Which means that they can't work anywhere else outside of Ontario. So if they decide to go somewhere else, they don't have anything. There's nothing formal for half of them.

What we know is that in Australia, this failed miserably. It failed and it cost them \$3 billion to rebuild the system that they had before. And it's still was missing 40% of the

capacity it had after it was rebuilt. Right? And what we are seeing is a trajectory exactly the same.

The problem we have with it and the reason why we're really alarmed with what we're seeing so far. So Amanda mentioned the 10,000 jobs and the campus closures. I mentioned the 10% of Ontario's already closing it. What we know is that Doug Ford has aspirations federally. He has a timeline on this., That's a clock in the background.

I don't know if it's a biological clock or what, what you'd call it, but it's ticking in his head. He's got this federal aspirations, so he needs to get this done. He needs to get all these people, you know, paid off into his pocket by the time he makes that bid.

I can go into examples. My personal favorite one is that six and a half million dollars went to a nightclub owner. It so happens it was the favorite nightclub of Rob Ford, the former Mayor of Toronto, who has an entire Netflix documentary, so I won't go into that too much. His favorite bar, the owner of that has received six and a half million dollars to train people. We have absolutely no evidence of a single person going through that program.

We have a \$20 billion mine in the North that received over \$10 million to train people and to make it worse, they're renting space from Northern College.

So we see this privatization creeping into our system exactly the same way it did in Australia.

Algonquin has closed its Perth campus. So the Perth campus was where we did all of our culturally nuanced programs like stone masonry and stone and woodcarving for building, "heritage programs" is what they call them.

That's been sold. And now we have one of the board members from Shopify wants to buy that campus and turn it into a not-for-profit campus to deliver business degrees. How is that not just an immediate privatization of a public college.

It's wild that we're seeing exactly what happened in Australia happen again right here under our nose, and no one was talking about it until the lid was blown off by OPSEU.

RESH: So, Australia, it was a policy model for the Doug Ford government, but has become sort of a cautionary tale for the rest of us. Ben, do you wanna come in on this? Because we're seeing, as Martin was saying this gross privatization of public education at the post-secondary level. The colleges, of course, are on the front line of this right now, and this is sort of knocking out the public competition for these private entities. So add to this and how is this erosion of colleges, as the report says, "endangering the provincial economy"?

BEN: This is part of a broader campaign against public services. And so we lose tomorrow's community workers, social workers in the city. Tomorrow's harm reduction workers. At George Brown College, where I teach the Assaulted Women and Children Counselling and Advocacy Program was closed. This is a program that was inaugurated by radical feminists who wanted to have a social justice approach to community building and community work.

That program was summarily closed. People were in the midst of that program, may not even be able to finish it.

RESH: And that program is the only one of its kind. Right.

BEN: Nationally.

RESH: Nationally, yeah. And, and they put people to work in women's shelters.

BEN: Yeah. And so this is the sort of worker that we're going to need as we watch this decay of our social welfare system. These roles become increasingly important. And they're being gutted.

And now if you listen to college management, they'll say, oh yes, we're going to make a program just like it. Don't you worry. And, you know, they're consulting police officers on how to deal with gender-based violence. So there seems to be a bit of a conflict of interest there in how this moves forward.

So that's at the urban level. At the rural level, we've begun to speak about this already. When Loyalist closed some of its programs - we're talking about 1% of its GDP in that area, just lopped off, just gone.

That's the college system. But we know that the Ford government is also underfunding hospitals. We know that the Ford government is also underfunding community worker programs.

Bill 124, which mandated many of Ontario's private sector workers back to work without a collective agreement was found to be unconstitutional in violation of Charter rights to negotiate a collective agreement.

Many workers who work in homeless centers, who work in community programs, who work in addiction centers have never seen back-pay, have never seen a raise since Bill 124. And these are workers who are themselves vulnerable working in the broader public service, who are serving the vulnerable.

And, you know, these are feminized workers. You know, these are racialized workers who are themselves not getting adequate support to do the necessary support work that results from under-serving our public sector.

So what is happening in the colleges is a big deal. It matters a lot for who we're educating down the line. But it comes in lockstep with an erosion of the things that makes Ontario a stable and robust democratic province in a country that claims to be the same.

This is all driven by a scarcity narrative that is spurious as we keep repeating here. This is the wealthiest province in one of the wealthiest nations in the world. This line that we need to cut benefits. We need to tighten our belt. This bottom line-ism is a myth. It's abstract. It is a pretext so that Doug Ford can pay the former leader of his campaign for provincial government, Hanif Harji, \$11 million to run a private catering company, can pay mining corporations that, are leading to the extractivism, that are perpetuating the extractivism that is leading to other environmental crises and anti-Indigenous relations.

They're paying something to the tune of \$29,000 per student to run these programs that, as Martin points out, is a non-transferrable skill.

If you get trained at this corporation and you say, you know what, actually this is an exploitative relationship. Let me just take my, training and go elsewhere. And they'll be like, what is this? This doesn't work here, sorry.

A college diploma is still the single highest correlate with employment at a time when youth unemployment is something like doubled from what it was 10 years ago. It's mind boggling.

RESH: Yet the message from recently Doug Ford was that in terms of youth unemployment, it's not systemic, they just have to look harder, which is an interesting response.

But Amanda, when we're talking about college workers, when we're talking about the striking workers, we're talking about the full-time. But we also know that the part-time support staff are also heading towards a strike vote.

AMANDA: Part-time workers are the most precarious in the system, and it took until 2018 and four kicks at the can to get them unionized to get that vote.

And despite having a collective agreement, they're still the most marginalized in our system because our part-time collective agreement expired January 31st, 2024. And yet they don't have it, and they seemingly weren't taken seriously from a negotiations perspective either.

I'm, for one, am happy that they're pushing towards a strike vote because when you look at the two collective agreements, there's a very big difference between the contents of our part-time worker collective agreement versus the full-time collective agreement. Colleges are still having to advocate for part-time to be considered regular part-time. Where it is still an uphill battle to get somebody deemed to be

regular part-time versus casual, because the protections even within the part-time collective agreement are very different for those two pieces.

Our student workers who the colleges rely on to fill gaps and to help deliver services and augment services for people, they're unionized now and that hasn't been a thing. And it's scary in some ways because it is entirely possible you know, we could still be out on strike then, or it's possible that we could be back at work and then they're going out.

And our divisional executives are really trying to strengthen those relationships between the part-time and the full-time workers. Because as we know, when labour lifts up labour, we lift up each other. When there are gains in one area, it helps others. The Employment Standards Act is a good example of that. And we all are in this fight together as that piece. And now the part-time faculty are now unionized, as Ben indicated earlier.

So now it means all workers in the college system outside of our managers obviously are now unionized. And that's huge.

That is huge because our system has relied on precarious workers, not only on the support staff side, but also on the faculty side for the entire time I've worked at the college system, and I'm sure long before that.

MARTIN: I do want to point out that the support staff part-time have been bargaining since January of 2024. They have been working at this now for two years. They agreed to go to the mediation with the CEC. The CEC have kicked away 23 out of 26 dates that were offered to them by William Kaplan, the mediator.

Right. So, like, to be very clear, the way the CEC treats these people is abysmal.

Everything Amanda said was correct, but I just wanted to underscore and highlight the problematic nature of the CEC.

The College Employer Council is this nebulous group who sit in an arm's length. You can't get an FOI from them. We don't know where their decisions are made. We know the board consists of all the presidents for the colleges.

But the colleges say, well, that's the CEC, and then the CEC says, oh, that's the colleges.

Bargaining with this group is a nightmare. And I just wanted to underscore that because, it can get lost in this about who it is that we deal with, with collective bargaining.

RESH: Absolutely. We're seeing the crisis, I'm hesitant to use that word, the, the scandal of what's happening to jobs within the college system.

But the colleges, as Ben pointed out earlier, they're such a fixture within communities, particularly within rural communities, it's impacting other jobs as well. So could you also speak about sort of the ecosystem of colleges and the wider impact?

MARTIN: I think it's really important to go back and look at why colleges were created. You mentioned the 60th anniversary.

Written into the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technologies Act. So the CAAT Act, it states very clearly that our colleges are not-for-profit and they exist to support our communities.

I don't have the exact language in front of me, but they are not-for-profit. And they are supposed to be supporting the interests of the communities they are in. So to suggest that now when we're carving off basic needs, right?

Estheticians, I got my hair done yesterday. It's like makeup for men, right? Getting a haircut. But without getting that done ... think of all the politicians in Ottawa who appear on TV, they don't even have somewhere to train the people to do that within a two and a half hour drive's radius of the city.

We lost regulatory affairs in our capital. So in Ottawa, a government town, you've got all of these people who are just not being trained, right?

Another one that you go to colleges for nursing. Well, now universities are competing for the same pot of money as colleges, who's gonna want to drag in all those international students. Well, now it's who can get those fees? So that's being cut outta colleges now.

People like flying in airplanes. I like flying in airplanes. It's much more efficient in a country like Canada than driving, I can tell you that. Well, aviation is done through colleges, as is aviation technicians. Well, those programs are being shut down in communities that need them the most. In the northern communities where we know that there are crises affecting children and families. Well guess what's being lost there? Child and youth workers. Not to mention the communities that need it the most, like Indigenous communities out in rural areas. Well, those are the campuses that are being closed.

This really is one of the most shocking attempts to just undercut the people out in the middle of nowhere. And Doug Ford's saying, of course, well, I've got the Skills Development Fund. You could just work with a local company and make up those differences. But we know it's not working.

Six and a half million dollars to train a couple of dozen people to work in a bar makes absolutely no sense. Absolutely no sense. When there are hospitality management, bartending continues to be a program that exists at several of our colleges for now.

These colleges are there to support their communities. In particularly small towns like Perth or Orillia or Muskoka, the college may be one of the larger employers.

RESH: And when you see the closing down of campuses, it's not only jobs within the college, but it's all of the jobs around the college.

MARTIN: Exactly. Colleges are there to train workers. We train the workers who are going into the field to keep our economy ticking over.

The idea that by cutting this off, we're not going to drastically affect all of the businesses, the entire community around it is daft. Anybody who thinks that wouldn't have an impact. How could there not be? If someone could explain to me how this wouldn't negatively impact the communities, I would be pleased to hear it. But even on its face, it just doesn't make any sense.

RESH: Right. What are we hearing, Ben, from other community stakeholders then, given these impacts?

BEN: Well, I think the thing that occurs to me primarily, and I'm painting with a broader brush here and deploying some conjecture. This is something I hear a lot when I go home, I actually went to high school in Orillia.

People don't wanna work, this line that "people don't wanna work". I think there is a linkage between institutional decline and decline of prospects that connect to people's investment in a future that does not feel equally invested in by their institutions.

To put that another way people who are about to enter into the workforce, who do not see the same potentials in terms of coming out from under student debt, owning houses. Some people are talking about they can't have children because they're afraid it's too costly. This decline of prospect breaks up consensus reality and breaks up people's inclination to be involved in an economy that should be regularly ticking over. So I think democratically this has a very negative effect, especially at a time when political literacy, media literacy is increasingly important.

Okay, we want to be a driving force in the economy. That's very important. But we don't also wanna fall victim to this notion that the bottom line is everything. There's something bigger, there's something bigger that colleges offer in terms of the social fabric, in terms of democratic society. And that has to do with being able to parse whether or not this is a belt-tightening that we need or this is an upward transfer of wealth.

We see people who are living hand to mouth, falling further and further and further behind Canada's billionaires who continue to make money as we are being told that there's no more profit in the system. We need to tighten our belt. We need to strip the copper wiring out of the walls.

I would only be repeating myself to talk about the community stakeholders that are losing from this. A college education is an excellent bit of armor for young people who need to enter into what is decidedly a polycrisis.

Being employable right now is highly important.

RESH: It is. Yet, this drama within the college system. It's not only happening within the college system, we're also seeing it happening within the university system. This is right across, post-secondary education.

But just to go to... and you've talked about it, all of you have talked about it. But in terms of the students, because they are a primary stakeholder here, college education is still one of the best ways to get the job that they're coming to the college to get. But this is having impacts on their education. So could you speak a bit more about what is the impacts to students who are right now learning or trying to learn in the middle of all of this?

BEN: I can speak a little bit to my specific experience.

I've been teaching for 16 years. In that time, I've watched my class sizes go up from 25 to 45 to 50. So just a few examples to illustrate what that means.

It means you can spend less time on grading. It means you can spend less time unpacking complicated ideas that would benefit multiple students. It means you can spend less time on serving the specific needs of different students.

I like to read to learn. Some people like to watch videos to learn. Some people want to learn by doing. You cannot offer that versatility as a faculty member when you are having your class sizes increased without consultation, let alone consent.

Since the nineties, we have seen contract faculty go from representing 6% of the total body of faculty members to representing upwards of 80% depending on the college.

So what that means for me is I don't get paid on Intersession Week, that is the break between the first half of the semester and the second half, let alone between semesters. So how do you think that is going to impact contact with students? The legacy of their programs? The networks they need to build to be able to be employable and to continue to be relevant in terms of their training?

Those are a few ways that I'm seeing it impact my students.

RESH: Martin, what about you?

MARTIN: Yeah, what I'm seeing is a lot of uncertainty. I wanna be clear, I teach in STEM and STEM for all of the wrong reasons, seems to be the one that everybody

throws money at. Even though we don't solve all the world's problems. I promise you, when we go to conferences, we need hotels to stay in as well, right? We need chefs to make food.

But I'm seeing a lot of uncertainty. Where do I go? What happens to my program? What are my options? I thought I was gonna become a barber. Well, I don't have anywhere to go. Right? You know, all these options that should be available to anyone are just being slashed.

If I wanna become a pilot, where can I study this? It's a good question. And if I have to move four hours away to be able to do that, is that something I still want to be able to do?

In this supply and demand sort of thought about what happens to those primary users of the system, i.e. the students, the answer is that the supply just got a lot less attractive. And that's gonna affect the way that they engage in the system as well.

RESH: And Amanda, the same question to you. And you're coming at this not from the faculty position, but from the support position, which is really sort of the fiber network of the college.

AMANDA: And I can tell you that support staff are integral in the student experience. We're the people who make sure that they're being connected with financial supports to be able to complete their education. We're the ones who are arranging for tutoring if they are having issues outside of class and getting those supports in place to make sure that they've got a well-rounded education. And we were also the people who are trying to connect them with supports to make sure that their mental health is okay while they're going through school and that they have the technology and the support to go through.

And my concern with support staff cuts is what will happen to those students? They're gonna fall through the cracks.

Five years ago, even, especially around COVID, there were all these conversations about mental health and the importance of mental health supports for everybody. But in the context of this conversation, students specifically, and yet our counselors have been cut on the smaller campuses. And they're getting funneled to an app.

And we learned through COVID, not everybody responds to that. Not everybody responds to the digital learning pieces and to accessing everybody virtually. There were a lot of students who struggled a lot with alternate delivery during COVID when we couldn't be in classes. They need that face-to-face interaction and those face-to-face supports. And if the college system is hemorrhaging 10,000 jobs, then it doesn't take a person even in the system to connect the dots that that means that student supports are being impacted. And then we run the risk of students not graduating appropriately.

And many of the colleges across the system offer the community integration through cooperative education program, which puts students in a program where they can get employability skills and so that they can get some jobs outside. They might not be able to handle like a full college program or a diploma program, but they can get a certificate that teaches them essential employability skills so that they can get a job and feel that worth of being responsible for their own wellbeing and their own futures. And those programs rely on accessibility advisors, tutors, the student success facilitators, the counselors, all of those pieces to help them.

And then the other piece as well is we know we have a contingency of students who are very interested in a well-rounded college experience, which includes athletics and group spaces and being able to do study groups and research and libraries and things like that.

And we're seeing an erosion of those services across the province. And we should be afraid of that. Because we know that the college system at the moment has the lowest unemployment rate of any educational outcome. We're even beating university students at the moment. But if we continue to erode those services, then what are we gonna do?

Because a lot of those services were designed to help students get through and to reduce attrition rates and to help students get over that line and complete their programs. And if we're taking those away, then the writing's on the wall that that student population then is gonna dry up as well. And what's that gonna do?

I believe it was Martin or it might have been Ben, who spoke about the lack of transferability in these private training institutions. So you get trained at this private institution, but it's not transferable to other places. The college has had a huge focus on transferable skills and making sure that programs are meeting the same outcomes.

We're very, very mandated provincially with learning outcomes, essential employability skill requirements, program advisory committees, and quality assurance processes. We're not seeing any of that for many of the private institutions. So when you go to a college in Ontario, an Ontario publicly-funded college, you know you're getting a quality education because there's a whole system built around ensuring that you do.

And my concern is also for the students who do get funneled into these private training programs and potentially spend all of this money at this private institution who then come out with a piece of paper that really isn't worth anything because it isn't transferable.

RESH: Absolutely. And another aspect of college education is work integrated learning, which are essentially those placements that's connecting the college with the community for the student. And all of those workers, those placement workers are also now on the line as well.

Amanda, I just wanna continue with you because you recently spoke with the Minister of Colleges and Universities, Nolan Quinn, when you were on the line. Can you share some of what was said?

AMANDA: Well to be completely honest, it all was kind of a blur because we had actually planned to picket at his office and we did, but found out that he was nearby at a press conference.

And we initially thought that the press conference was happening on St. Lawrence College property because it was a, for a funding announcement for the St. Lawrence River Institute, who's building is on the property for St. Lawrence College. And it turned out it was at Grey's Creek, so five of us had gone.

In the very short time that we were able to talk to Nolan, Veronica Atard from our bargaining team was present and she spoke about the importance of getting College Employer Council back to the table and urging College Employer Council to actually negotiate with the team. Because at the moment it appears they're really only negotiating through the media, which is just not what the process is designed for. And Veronica spoke about the impacts to students as well.

Nolan Quinn is actually a graduate of St. Lawrence College. He graduated from the business program, business administration, I believe, at St. Lawrence College Cornwall. And yet we hadn't seen him on our lines, and he hadn't stopped by to see us, even though MPPs in Brockville and Kingston had stopped by.

And we, the group that was there urged Nolan Quinn as well to advocate for St. Lawrence College and to advocate for his constituents because Cornwall needs education. And Nolan is a graduate of the only post-secondary institution left in Cornwall.

Years ago our campus was shared with Ottawa University and Ottawa University also ran programs in Cornwall. I wouldn't be able to tell you specifically when they left, but that's been a while.

But part of that conversation was reminding Nolan that we're the only viable post-secondary education option for his constituents, and it's one that he benefited from as well. And his program itself is slated for cancellation as well. And as a business owner, because he also owns the Dairy Queen in Cornwall, he should be concerned about that. And it was just trying to get him to help. And again, we didn't have a long chat with him just because of the nature of the day, but my understanding from our bargaining team is that it did help. And Nolan did urge CEC to get back to the table. So I think that is just wonderful.

RESH: Absolutely. And after today we'll see what that means.

Ben, as we said earlier, we are seeing more attacks on workers, especially those in public sectors. Not only in Ontario, but across the country. Right. The latest news is

that Canada Post is going to into its second strike of the year. So this is a time of rapid shifts in the economy. Frontline workers, of course, are bearing the brunt of this. Is this also signaling a shift within union organizing? So could you speak about union organizing in this time?

BEN: Yeah. I like this question. I think we are seeing an economic realignment and it has there's multiple facets to that. It has to do with how trade is shifting globally. It has to do with technological changes.

I keep thinking about this example in Italy where the public sector unions there are leading demonstrations in support of a flotilla to Gaza. It has multiple unions out in support of it and has led to military support of this flotilla.

As somebody who teaches history, I'm always fascinated by what is this breaking point? What is it that causes people to go from making demonstrations in their little corner, worrying about their specific more individual needs and getting together.

We are trying to do it within our broader sector, that is the various CAATs as we call them, the support workers and the faculty workers. We need to see that with other parts of our union.

We see CUPE coming out in support. We see CLC coming out in support.

We have through these last say 40, 50 years, been a part of a project that I think of as a liberal consensus. Other people describe it in this way where a lot of the progress has been at the level of privilege, has been at the level of fighting for inches within our corporate spaces.

And the face of that battle has changed. The face of that fight has changed. And I think it means that we, particularly in our own union, are a part of a cultural shift from what to some people might look like business unionism to a more movement-based person-to-person unionism. And people will maybe quibble with that assessment. But we are beginning to understand that part of this neoliberal trend that emphasizes the bottom line also emphasizes an individualism that does not serve worker rights, that does not serve worker power.

It's very easy for us to forget because we don't have the money, we don't have the ear of government. So we think, ah, we're alone. We have no power.

But we are the ones who allow money and capital to accumulate through waking up day in and day out and doing our jobs. We are the ones who hand government their mandates.

Deena Ladd had this really good point about whoever gets in power, we cannot forget that the work remains to shift public opinion and to shift the mandates that we are giving our government.

And I think that movement-building, movement-building across sectors, across class lines across, different social barriers is what we're seeing, but it's also what is going to be necessary.

If disaster capitalism continues to profit off of these moments of unrest, of uncertainty to their profit, we have to see that that's also a possibility for us, that is organized labour, to benefit. To step into that uncertainty, and by collectivizing our fight, raising the water in the harbor for everybody, as Amanda says.

RESH: Essentially going back to our roots, because that's sort of where we started. We started as a working class movement.

And it's interesting that, you know, last week we had the Draw the Line protest across the country, and basically that's what they were saying, we need a broad based multi-coalition movement,

Martin, if we can't, if we cannot turn this around, what is the future looking like for colleges and communities in Ontario, but also beyond?

MARTIN: Yeah, I mean, it's hard to say based on the model from Australia, because obviously the model for Australia failed and was aborted and cost an enormous amount of money. I think it also depends on how workers and the communities react to this.

I have to express some frustration that this hasn't caused more of a scandal than it has. And honestly, I don't know what to do with that particularly. This is, to me outrageous. But it doesn't seem to be having that same impact.

I know that there's a lot of apathy in a lot of communities.

We saw, you know, the votes for Doug Ford, he obviously won, but it was only a handful of people that actually came out to vote at all. So the question is, is this going to be enough to motivate it on?

If I was to put a crystal ball on, I would say that if they lose, whatever government comes in, is going to be whacked with a three to five billion dollar bill to fix the system that he screwed up.

Hopefully people can tell from my accent, I, didn't grow up here, but for some reason, you know, Ontarians love to say, oh, look at this left wing government, they just cost us all this money. Right? I don't really understand how they drag stuff up from 40 years ago and say, oh, this is the reason I won't vote for them again.

But you're recognizing that this was deliberately done by a Conservative government and it's going to deliberately impact whatever non-Conservative government comes back.

If it doesn't get corrected, there are certainly pockets of the US that I would point to and say their community college system is the Wild West and you could expect that; where student fees are not controlled. Where student recruitment is not controlled. Where big publishing groups like Pearson and other groups will happily take over classrooms and just deliver materials.

Yeah, that is where this could be going. A lack of controls and a move to this privatized education system.

That's not what I want. It's not what I think most people want when you ask them, When you go to people and say, is this what you want? You get the answer, no, I don't want that. But they don't seem to be motivated right now to stop what's happening and stop getting you there.

I personally struggle with that as a person who is active in this area. I'm not sure I'm the best equipped to be able to necessarily say what the future holds for those reasons. It really just depends on whether people react.

MARTIN: Doug Ford is very sensitive to these sorts of scandals hitting and we saw it with the Green Belt. We saw it with other things.

Is this one big enough to hit him? I think it's got all of the symptoms of being big enough.

We've got direct pipelines of money going from the slush fund he created directly into his sycophants pockets. We'll see.

RESH: We'll see. And already it's one of the largest mass layoffs in provincial history. Right. So there you go.

MARTIN: Yeah, the larger one. I think the only one we could find that was larger was a 1947, 49, and it was a mine, 12 to 15,000 people. So Ontario colleges are now going through the largest mass layoff in Ontario's history. Save one mine in 1949 .

RESH: Amanda, final word to you. So again, support staff are heading into mediation. Ideally, what do you want to see? What do we want to see looking on the brighter side of this.

AMANDA: On the brighter side of it, I'm hoping that people will put more pressure on Doug Ford's government to reassess and readdress the system because when we did talk to Nolan Quinn, his response was, well, we've invested this \$2.5 billion, et cetera, and we were quick to correct him. And then he was quick to blame the Liberal policies on international student visas, and we were quick to correct him. And so we need people who are gonna do the research and have the conversations with people that they're connected to. Because the only way that we're really gonna be able to fight it is through combating the misinformation that's out there and educating the people.

Martin brought up a really good point about how this should have been scaring people before. It should have been a larger scandal before, and we're hoping that that word spreads.

Now, on a more personal note, I'm hoping that CEC does come to the table with a viable offer, or at the very least, a desire to negotiate with the team because we don't want to be on strike. We would much prefer doing the jobs we love, supporting the students that we love and helping them grow in their education. And we don't want to see this drag out forever.

But we also believe that it's a very worthy fight and a very worthy cause. And we're hoping to see more people join in that fight and again, continue to combat that misinformation and continue to question the things that they're seeing in the media. Things like CEC's communications that have contained untruths.

We need lots of people who are okay to say to their coworkers and their friends and their family to say, I know that that's what this says, but that's not true. And combat that information.

Until we have people who are willing to raise their voices up and continue to do that, it's gonna be a much more difficult fight ahead.

We're just hoping for some job protections and hoping to not see as many layoffs and as many college closures and some improved benefits. And getting back to work and supporting the students, which is what we love to do.

RESH: Lovely. Thank you. And OPSEU's *Dismantling Public Futures* report, as well as Ben's article, *The Manufactured Crisis in Ontario Colleges* will be linked in the show notes to this episode.

Amanda, Ben and Martin, thank you so much for this really important conversation. It has been a pleasure.

BEN: Thank you very much Resh.

AMANDA: Thank you very much.

MARTIN: Thank you.

RESH: That was Amanda Shaw, support staff and Support Staff President for OPSEU Local 418 at St. Lawrence College. Martin Lee, Second Vice President of OPSEU Local 415, and full-time faculty at Algonquin College and Ben McCarthy, member of OPSEU's Part-Time and Sessional Divisional Executive and part-time faculty at George Brown College.

Following the taping of this episode, mediation talks between the Ontario Public Service Employees Union and the College Employer Council were unsuccessful and Ontario College full-time support staff continue to strike.

OPSEU's *Dismantling Public Futures* report and Ben McCarthy's article, *The Manufactured Crisis in Ontario's Colleges* are linked in the show notes to this episode.

And I'm your host, Resh Budhu. Thanks for listening.

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