

July 23, 2020

Prof. Claudia Steinke
President
University of Lethbridge Faculty Association (ULFA)
Room D620, University Hall
4401 University Drive

Dear Prof. Steinke,

MUNFA, the union representing academic staff at Memorial University of Newfoundland, has been watching with alarm the Alberta government's sustained assault on post-secondary education, the wider public sector, and organized labour. Working in provinces that are connected in so many ways, we write to extend our political support.

We, too, work in a province where the decisions of past and current governments leave our economic fortunes tied in large part to extractive industries and the global price of minerals and oil and gas, matters we have no control over. We understand first-hand the real harm caused by government austerity politics that include – among other harmful measures – significant funding cuts to higher education. We share in the concerns voiced by an Alberta post-secondary education coalition about the impact of cuts to institutions at a time when both the provinces and Canada need our public universities and colleges more than ever. As that coalition put it in a May 2020 letter to Minister Nicolaides: “investment in Alberta’s post-secondary education is an investment in the security of our food, our health, our wealth, and our standards of living.” Never has this been truer than in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its implications for every aspect of our lives, from how we organize our work, to our wider economic strategies, to everyday social interactions, to our relationship to the rest of the living world.

The direct damage done by these cuts is compounded in your case by the way future funding is being tied to “performance” measures that interfere with institutional autonomy and academic freedom. This kind of performance-based funding must be seen for what it is: an attempt to reduce post-secondary education to a servant of private-sector interests. It is a model that governments across the country, including here in Newfoundland and Labrador, are pushing to greater and lesser degrees. As such, it is a threat to comprehensive public post-secondary education that concerns us all. We must fight it together.

With the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations, we also believe that the Alberta 2030 Review, which forces a second round of restructuring on PSE institutions inside of a year, is a damaging waste of resources, particularly given that the review excludes any meaningful input from PSE sector workers and appears designed to deliver a pre-ordained agenda.

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Finally, we believe that the threat Bill 32 poses to the ability of workers to organize effectively endangers democracy itself. Strong unions improve working conditions - from wages to job security to health and safety protections - even for non-unionized workers. Bill 32 represents an attempt to weaken unions' bargaining power by restricting the kinds of job action and political expression they can engage in. The attempt to muzzle organized labour will not only harm all workers by restricting unions' ability to organize for fair treatment. By seeking to limit political discourse and contestation it threatens to create a democratic deficit. Bill 32 may very well be found by the courts to be unconstitutional. However, vital as it is, legal action moves slowly, requires significant resources, and takes the action away from those most directly affected.

The ideological program that is being advanced in your province will not stop at the Alberta border. Indeed, as noted above, we see elements of the same agenda at work here in Newfoundland and Labrador and across the country, as governments introduce performance-based funding, populate governing boards with corporate-sector appointees, and introduce austerity measures designed to divide us at a time when we most need to exercise our collective power.

MUNFA extends our political support to Alberta's academic staff associations and its wider union movement. The harms you face are threats to us all. Please let us know about any campaigns or actions you have planned against these retrogressive measures. While we certainly support legal action, the urgency of the situation makes us particularly interested in reinforcing any political message you send.

We stand with you and look forward to working together in our common interest.

In solidarity,



Ken Snelgrove, PhD
President, Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association