

# CONVERGENCE

NEWSPAPER FROM STUDENTS AGAINST TUITION HIKES - ÉTUDIANT.ES CONTRE LA HAUSSE DES FRAIS DE SCOLARITÉ - VOL. 1 - FEBRUARY 2024



## Tuition Hikes: It Was Never a Question of French

*October 30th demonstration.*

### IMPACT UPDATE: UNIVERSITIES UNDER SIEGE

The decision to hike tuition fees for out-of-province students has sent shockwaves through our educational institutions, but let us be clear: this is not about preserving the French language; it's about squeezing every last penny from already strained budgets.

Professors and faculty members, the backbone of our universities, are feeling the pinch acutely. With the need to slash budgets looming large, university administrations are left with little choice but to make deep cuts. However, with a staggering 90% of the budget allocated to salaries, there is minimal flexibility. Consequently, courses are being slashed, class sizes ballooning, and mandatory classes pushed to a biennial schedule. Departmental mergers loom ominously, threatening the diversity and richness of our academic offerings.

The Concordia Faculty of Arts and Sciences, a cornerstone of our educational landscape, has already seen a staggering 10% reduction in course offerings. The pressure on administrators is palpable, as they scramble to navigate these tumultuous waters while facing mounting resistance from faculty and students alike.

But the impact extends far beyond the confines of lecture halls and academic departments. Every facet of campus life is feeling the strain. From clubs to free meal programs, campus cafes to health and housing services, the squeeze is on. At Concordia University, drastic measures such as cutting the thermostat to a maximum of 21 degrees exemplify the lengths to which institutions are forced to go in order to make ends meet.

Engineering programs, vital to our province's economic future, are particularly hard-hit.

Applications have plummeted by a staggering 50%, sounding alarm bells for the future of innovation and technological advancement in Quebec. Meanwhile, prestigious institutions like McGill University are already reeling from the fallout. A hiring freeze has been implemented, and revenue losses are projected to reach tens of millions of dollars. Application rates at McGill and Concordia are plummeting by over 30%, signaling a troubling trend that threatens to undermine the vibrancy and diversity of our student body.

### BAND-AID SOLUTIONS: UNSUSTAINABLE MEASURES

In a bid to quell the outcry sparked by the tuition hikes, McGill and Concordia have unveiled new scholarships tailored for students hailing from provinces beyond Quebec's borders. These scholarships, ranging from \$1,500 to \$4,000 annually and renewable for up to four years, are touted as a panacea to offset the burden of increased tuition fees. However, the reality behind these scholarships paints a less rosy picture.

The eligibility criteria for these scholarships hinge on grade point averages, effectively excluding a significant portion of students from consideration. This perpetuates a false sense of meritocracy, insinuating that those with higher grades are more deserving of financial support—an assertion we vehemently reject. Education is a right, not a privilege reserved for a select few based on arbitrary academic metrics. We demand that McGill and Concordia reevaluate their scholarship conditions to encompass all out-of-province students, regardless of their GPA.



Furthermore, the sustainability of these scholarships is questionable at best. Concordia University's staggering \$70 million debt and McGill's potential revenue loss, ranging from \$44 million to \$94 million, cast doubt on the long-term viability of such financial aid programs. With hiring freezes and budget cuts already implemented across departments, it's clear that these institutions are grappling with financial uncertainty. Banks have raised concerns, leading to higher borrowing rates—a harbinger of further fiscal challenges on the horizon.

Another point to note is that the Canada Award, a \$3,000 bursary for out-of-province students at McGill, is slated to be a one-time measure for entering class 2024-2025 students only. This decision was rapidly implemented after a significant drop in applications before the Christmas break. Administrators view this as a strategic move to reduce their projected loss, stating that they are "spending \$4 million to bring that loss closer to \$44 million." The short-term nature of the Canada Award is also influenced by language regulations, which will only apply to the entering class of 2025-2026. This creates a one-year gap between students who will need to learn French and those who will face higher tuition fees, with the Canada Award aiming to assist a few more students before the new regulations take effect.

We demand transparency from McGill and Concordia regarding the funding and maintenance of these scholarships. If next year heralds an announcement that the universities can no longer sustain the expense of these programs, we will find ourselves back at square one—except this time, without the momentum garnered from our collective resistance. The tuition hikes will remain entrenched, and our window of opportunity to fight for accessible education will have closed.

## TRICKLE-DOWN EFFECTS ACROSS QUEBEC'S SCHOOLS

The ramifications of Quebec's tuition hike extend far beyond the confines of McGill and Concordia, reverberating throughout the entire province's educational landscape. All universities, whether French or English, are intricately connected through a shared pool of surpluses collected on tuition. Currently, Concordia, McGill, and Bishop's all receive about 50% of their budgets from the redistributed funds, while the average across all Quebec universities is 70%. The claim by the government that English universities are receiving an unfair portion is patently false.

Reflect on the staggering figures unveiled by McGill University. While the government endeavors to secure savings of \$46.6 million through this measure, the broader implications are dire. Quebec's decision to escalate out-of-province tuition stands to inflict an annual economic loss of up to \$35 million, according to McGill's estimations. Leveraging insights gleaned from a study conducted by the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal, McGill has meticulously quantified the substantial economic contributions facilitated by out-of-province and international students. These students inject a significant \$81.8 million into the Quebec economy, underscoring their pivotal role in fortifying local businesses and propelling economic growth.

The decline in enrollment not only jeopardizes the financial stability of individual universities but also poses a systemic threat to Quebec's broader economic prosperity. As the influx of out-of-province and international students dwindles, so too does the financial support available for local students in the form of scholarships and grants provided to post secondary institutions across the province. The fallout from dwindling enrollment of out-of-province and international students will be felt collectively, amplifying the impact on every institution.

It's imperative to recognize that the repercussions of Quebec's tuition hike extend far beyond campus borders. They have the potential to reshape the socioeconomic landscape of the entire province, exacerbating existing inequalities and hindering opportunities for future generations. Now, more than ever, we must advocate for policies that prioritize accessibility and inclusivity in education, safeguarding the prosperity of Quebec's students and communities alike.

## AUSTERITY SHIFT: LEGAULT'S AGENDA EXPOSED



Recent events and public sentiment paint a damning picture of the state of public services in Quebec. According to a December Léger poll, nearly one in two Quebecers (44%) are seething with anger over the deteriorating quality of public services in the province. This widespread discontent manifested itself in the resounding support for the strike actions undertaken by Quebec's 600,000-member public sector just before the new year.

However, the proposed exorbitant tuition hikes for out-of-province students are not isolated incidents. Rather, they are symptomatic of a



*In the spring of 2012, Quebec became the epicenter of an unprecedented social conflict. "The strike is student, the struggle is popular!" echoed through the crowded streets, where people from all walks of life converged.*

broader trend—an alignment with austerity measures championed by the Quebec provincial government. From the chronic underfunding of healthcare workers and educators to the gutting of public transit services, from the encroaching specter of energy privatization to the erosion of tenants' rights with the introduction of Bill 31, which permits landlords to refuse lease assignments for reasons other than serious grounds—the agenda is clear.

These measures not only exacerbate existing inequalities but also signify a regressive step away from fostering access to meaningful and fulfilling employment opportunities for both Quebec and out-of-province graduates eager to contribute to the province's growth. Instead of investing in the future prosperity of Quebec and its residents, the government's austerity agenda prioritizes short-term fiscal savings at the expense of long-term societal well-being.

It's evident that these policies are not in the best interests of Quebecers. They represent a betrayal of the values of fairness, equity, and opportunity that are foundational to our society. Now more than ever, it is imperative that we unite in opposition to these austerity measures and demand policies that prioritize the prosperity and well-being of all Quebecers, now and in the future.

## AUSTERITY AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF UNIVERSITIES

### PHASE 1: SELLING HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER

The landscape of higher education in Quebec is undergoing a profound transformation—a shift toward privatization that threatens to undermine the foundational principles of accessibility and equity. At the heart of this transformation lies a convergence of austerity measures and historical trends that have gradually eroded the public nature of our universities.

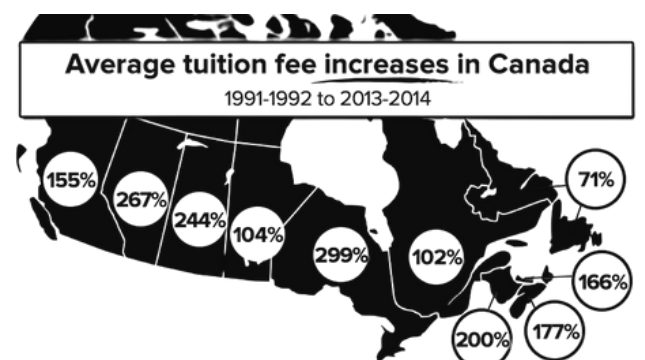
Historically, universities in Quebec relied heavily on public funding, with government grants comprising nearly 80% of their revenue three decades ago. However, this paradigm has shifted dramatically over time. Currently, less than 50% of university revenue comes from government grants, with student fees accounting for roughly 25%, and the remaining quarter stemming from donations, products, services, and investment returns.

To comprehend this decline in public funding, one must look back to the watershed moment of the 1995 Federal Budget, which ushered in a new era of austerity in Canada. With \$12 billion slashed from health and social transfers, tuition fees skyrocketed, marking the beginning of a steady decline in public funding for post-secondary education. This trend has been particularly devastating for Indigenous communities, exacerbating decades of educational stagnation and inequality.

The austerity agenda introduced three key metrics to justify government funding. The concept of *differentiation* has emerged as a cornerstone of this privatization agenda, insisting that universities specialize in their purportedly strongest areas rather than offering a comprehensive education. While on the surface, this may seem like a strategic move, in reality, it translates to major cuts to non-priority departments, disproportionately impacting accessibility in regional areas and eroding the diversity of academic offerings.

Under the guise of *Program Prioritization Processes*, universities are coerced into ranking their departments based on performance metrics, redirecting funding from the bottom to the top. This data-driven approach forces departments to become fixated on survival rather than scholarly pursuits, leading to skewed priorities—where, for example, parking fees generate more revenue than investments in critical academic departments like English.

Moreover, the imposition of *outcome measures*, or performance indicators, by the government further exacerbates the commodification of education. These metrics, ranging from graduate salaries to commercialized research output, tie a portion of university operating funds to meeting predefined targets, effectively transforming higher education into a profit-driven enterprise.



The consequences of this shift toward privatization are bleak. Over the past decade, tuition fees have soared at an average rate of 3.7% annually, outpacing the rate of inflation. Ancillary fees, such as residence costs and meal plans, have experienced exponential growth,

further burdening students already grappling with the rising cost of education. Residence costs increased by 274%, and meal plans by 197%, compared to a Consumer Price Index increase of 160%. This phenomenon, known as “ancillary creep,” is a sneaky way to raise fees when tuition is regulated.

The 2012 attempt by the Quebec Liberal government to implement a 75% tuition hike was met with widespread resistance, culminating in a massive student strike that toppled the Charest government. However, subsequent administrations, including the return of the Liberals under Philippe Couillard, have continued down the path of privatization. In 2018, the Couillard government deregulated international student tuition fees and introduced performance metrics tied to university funding, effectively greenlighting universities to set international student tuition rates at their discretion. This move marked a significant escalation in the erosion of accessibility and equity within Quebec's higher education system, as it placed even greater financial burden on international students while further empowering universities to prioritize profit over the well-being of their student body.

In essence, the tuition hikes imposed by the CAQ government are merely the latest chapter in a troubling narrative of privatization and chronic underfunding of universities across Canada. This trend represents a betrayal of the fundamental principles of accessibility and equity in higher education. It is crucial that we stand in opposition to these policies and advocate for a return to a public education system that prioritizes the well-being and prosperity of all those living in Quebec, irrespective of their background or socioeconomic status.



## PHASE 2: DIVIDE AND CONQUER

The CAQ government's strategy in raising tuition fees for out-of-province students at English universities is a calculated move aimed at minimizing resistance and deflecting attention from the broader implications of their policies. By targeting only English-speaking institutions and non-Quebec residents, they create a divisive narrative centered around “language rights” and identity politics, effectively masking their true intentions.

The smokescreen of “language rights” serves to obscure the government's broader agenda of reducing accessibility and affordability in higher education. If their primary concern were genuinely about protecting the French language, they would have been receptive to the significant concession offered by Concordia and McGill. In early November, these universities proposed a francization plan, which would have ensured that a substantial portion of non-French-speaking students would attain intermediate proficiency in French by graduation. This proposal, which included making French-language courses mandatory for undergraduate students, was outright rejected by the Legault government. The Minister of Higher Education, Pascale Déry, has continued to stonewall any other offers from universities.

The government has employed a deliberate strategy of disinformation and narrative manipulation to advance its anti-Anglophone agenda, particularly regarding language policies in education. By consistently shifting the narrative and disseminating misleading information, they aim to sow confusion and garner support for their divisive policies. One glaring example of this tactic is the government's claim that tuition is more expensive in Ontario, leading to an influx of students coming to McGill for cheaper rates. However, this claim is misleading and not supported by the facts. Despite this, the government continues to perpetuate these falsehoods to justify their harmful policies and undermine the Anglophone community in Quebec.

The CAQ's selective targeting of English universities and out-of-province students is a strategic maneuver designed to fragment opposition and weaken collective resistance. By isolating certain demographics and institutions, they hope to mitigate pushback and deflect scrutiny from the larger implications of their policies.

However, it's essential to see through this facade of linguistic protectionism and recognize the broader implications of the government's actions. Their agenda of raising tuition fees and reducing accessibility affects all students, regardless of language or origin. It's imperative that we unite across linguistic and cultural divides to challenge these policies and demand a return to a public education system that prioritizes accessibility, equity, and the general prosperity of all Quebec inhabitants.

## PHASE 3: EVERYONE ELSE PAYS MORE



As the CAQ government's agenda of massive fee hikes for Canadian students unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that their purported concern for “language rights” is merely a smokescreen for broader austerity measures. This thinly veiled attempt at linguistic chauvinism fails to deceive those who see through the facade, particularly Francophone CÉGEP and university unions.

If the CAQ's plan to impose exorbitant fees for out-of-province students succeeds, it won't be long before politicians use a familiar argument: If international students, Canadian out-of-province students, and students in other provinces are subjected to high fees, why shouldn't Francophone Quebecois students pay their fair share? This line of reasoning, cloaked in notions of fairness, threatens to further burden already marginalized student populations.

In an unequivocal stance against these regressive policies, Francophone CÉGEP and university unions—ADEESE, AFÉA, AFESPED, and AGECEVM—issued a joint statement on October 23rd denouncing Legault's decision as a testament to divisive and prejudiced motives. They assert that “the fear of anglicization is being used as a pretext to limit access to education for all university students in Quebec.” Such regressive politics not only undermine equitable access to education but also betray the principles of fairness and equal opportunity essential for a thriving academic environment.

The CAQ's attempt to pit linguistic communities against one another in a bid to advance their austerity agenda is both shortsighted and damaging. It is imperative that we stand in solidarity against these divisive tactics and demand policies that prioritize accessibility, fairness, and inclusivity in higher education for all students.



*Students march in solidarity with ninth-floor occupiers down MacKay Street on February 11th, 1969, echoing calls for justice and equality.*

# UNITY AGAINST DISCRIMINATORY POLICIES

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED

International students have long played a significant role in shaping the culture of resistance and activism within Quebec's universities. Many have been at the forefront of historical movements, such as the infamous Sir George Williams affair, where students occupied the ninth-floor computer lab to protest against institutionalized racism and prejudice against Black West Indian students. Spearheading the movement, international students were quick to take action in protest of apartheid South Africa, especially during the '80s and '90s. Moreover, international students have also led the charge in championing support towards the Palestinian cause, a movement that has only continued to rise since the early 2000s.

However, the recent tuition hikes pose a severe threat to international students, exacerbating existing challenges and inequalities. The currency devaluation imposed on much of the Global South by Western powers, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, has further compounded the financial strain on many international students. As tuition rates continue to rise, the disparity in exchange rates means that many students are now paying up to two to four times the amount in their home country's currency compared to just five years ago.

The minimum tuition fee for international students is set to increase to \$20,000, a substantial burden for many already struggling to cover living expenses and other academic costs. While the exact extent of the increase remains uncertain, universities will now have the discretion to raise tuition fees as they see fit, with little regard for the financial well-being of international students.

It's important to note that international students already subsidize tuition rates for all Quebec students through their exorbitant fees. A decline in international student enrollment at anglophone universities will not only reduce funding for everyone but also place additional financial strain on institutions already grappling with budget cuts and resource shortages.

Non-francophone international students will face additional challenges, as they will be required to attain Level 5 oral proficiency in French before graduating. This prerequisite

may necessitate additional semesters of study and incur further tuition expenses, adding to the financial burden borne by international students.

Furthermore, recent changes to Quebec's immigration rules, excluding anglophone international students from applying for permanent residency, further compound the challenges faced by this vulnerable demographic. Despite claims that tuition hikes are intended to retain students after graduation, such policies actively discourage international students from establishing roots in Quebec.

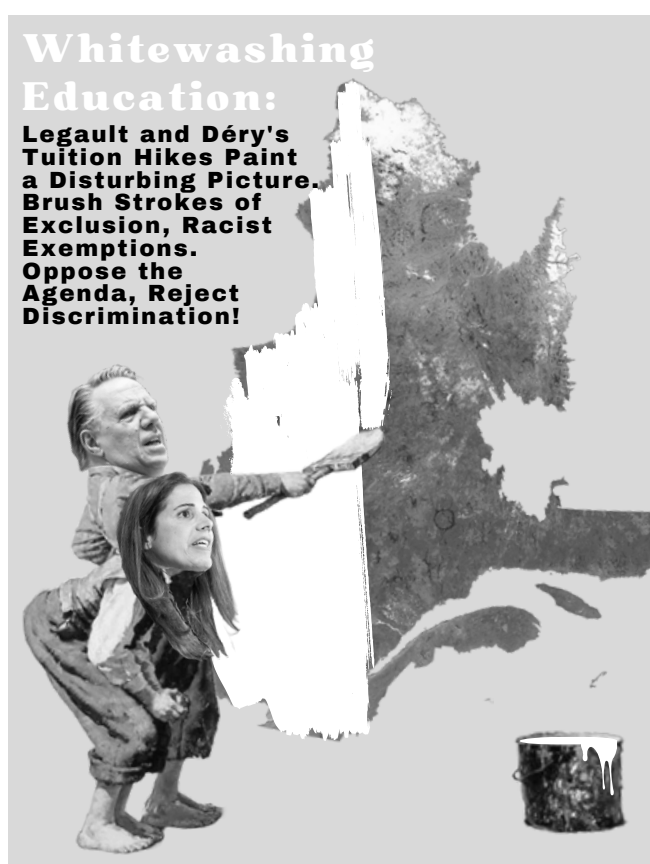
International students from France and Belgium enjoy a significant advantage, as they are exempt from the tuition hikes even if they choose to attend an English university, paying around \$9,000 annually. While 38 other countries have some form of agreement with the Quebec government to offer reduced international tuition fees, these arrangements are highly restrictive and favor specific groups. Priority is often given to students in STEM fields, and a significant portion of the available spots are allocated to students attending French universities, further ostracizing international students studying in English institutions.

For instance, Morocco receives the largest number of fee exemptions, providing reduced tuition to only 45 undergraduate students annually across all universities in Quebec. However, the actual number of students benefiting from these exemptions at Concordia, McGill, or Bishop's University is significantly lower, ranging from 9 to 18 students. Additionally, undergraduate international students from China attending English universities who previously received exemptions will now face an increased tuition rate of over \$12,000, equivalent to the out-of-province rate.

It is worth noting that only a maximum of 21 international students from China attending English universities will be eligible for this exemption annually, further restricting access to financial relief.

The preferential treatment afforded to certain countries, such as Israel, over others, including some francophone former French colonies, raises concerns about the underlying motivations behind these policies. By prioritizing exemptions based on nationality and field of study, the Quebec government perpetuates inequalities and reinforces existing power dynamics within the education system.

While some merit-based bursaries are offered to out-of-province students, no such financial support has been extended to international students, further exacerbating their financial insecurity and marginalization. As we confront these unjust policies, it is essential to stand in solidarity with international students and demand equitable and inclusive education for all. The exemptions granted to international students from France and Belgium, while denying similar privileges to students from other francophone nations, underscore the discriminatory nature of these policies. Moreover, the limited number of fee exemptions offered to students from other countries, such as Morocco and China, highlights the exclusivity and arbitrariness of the system.



## BROADENING THE AGENDA: ETHNO-NATIONALIST INTENTIONS REVEALED

The CAQ government's decision to implement massive tuition hikes for out-of-province students is not just about "language rights"—it's part of a broader ethno-nationalist agenda that prioritizes certain demographics while marginalizing others. This agenda, far from championing the rights of all Quebecers, systematically devalues and privatizes other forms of social services, revealing a disturbing pattern of discrimination and exclusion.

At its core, the tuition hikes are inherently racist policies that disproportionately impact marginalized communities. While the government claims to be protecting the French language, their actions speak volumes. Students from France and Belgium's predominantly white, wealthy communities continue to benefit from a tuition exemption, allowing them to study at Quebec universities for a mere \$9,000 a year. This glaring double standard excludes students from 27 other French-speaking countries, perpetuating systemic inequalities based on nationality and socioeconomic status.

By granting exemptions to wealthy, white students from European countries while denying the same privileges to students from other French-speaking nations, the CAQ government exposes its true colors. This selective favoritism serves to reinforce existing power structures and perpetuate racial and economic disparities within Quebec's education system.

Moreover, this ethno-nationalist agenda extends beyond higher education, encompassing a range of social services and policies. From healthcare to housing, the government's relentless push towards privatization and deregulation disproportionately harms marginalized communities while benefiting the privileged few.

It's crucial to recognize the tuition hikes for what they truly are: not just misguided policies masquerading as language protectionism, but calculated maneuvers designed to further entrench inequality and division within Quebec society. These hikes serve only to benefit the wealthy elite and the politicians seeking to ensure their own reelection by pandering to their conservative voter base and catering to corporate interests. As advocates for justice and equality, we must stand united against these discriminatory policies and demand a future where all Quebecers, regardless of their background or nationality, have access to affordable and inclusive education.

## CONCLUSION: WE HAVE THE POWER TO STOP IT

In the face of unjust tuition hikes and discriminatory policies, it's easy to feel powerless. But history has shown us time and time again that when students unite, we have the power to effect change. Through collective action and solidarity, we can stop these regressive policies in their tracks.

Let's remember the lessons of the past—tuition rates in Quebec are as low as they are because students have mobilized and fought back. Strikes have proven to be powerful tools for challenging injustice and winning concessions. Even a small program like the School of Community and Public Affairs Students' Association, with 227 students enrolled in winter 2023, has the potential to make a significant impact. If these students were to go on an unlimited general strike, threatening to fail en masse, the province would lose an estimated \$2,456,140 spent per year on SCPA undergrads. And when these students have to retake their classes next year, that number doubles to \$4,912,280.

The reason Quebec tuition remains less than half the average Canadian rate is simple: student collective action. It's up to us to harness that power once again and demand the education system we deserve—one that is accessible, equitable, and inclusive for all. So let's join together, raise our voices, and show the government that we refuse to accept policies that undermine our rights and perpetuate inequality. Together, we have the power to stop it. Strike, strike, strike!

## UP TO SPEED ON OUR EFFORTS

Since the announcement of the tuition hike, student associations at McGill, Concordia, and UQAM, along with others, have organized various protests, including town halls, workshops, demonstrations, and strikes, to oppose the increase and rally students together. Administrators at major English-language universities have also voiced opposition due to concerns about enrollment and funding. Liberal MNAs presented a petition against the hike in the Assemblée nationale, garnering over 33,000 signatures in a month.

Tensions heightened as student associations at Concordia initiated strikes in response to the proposed hike. On November 30, over 1,000 students participated in a one-day strike organized by various associations. This escalated when 11,000 students from McGill and Concordia declared a three-day strike from January 31st to February 2nd. Despite the Quebec government's concession to lower the proposed increase to 33%, the Comité consultatif sur l'accessibilité financière aux études is now urging a rescindment of the out-of-province tuition hike. The student movement remains steadfast in its opposition as the fight continues.

Join the fight by reaching out to your student association, contacting your representatives, and urging them to convene a general assembly. Share these resources with them, draft a strike motion, and be ready to present your arguments. If your student association is inactive, reach out to the larger student union representing the entire school. There are established procedures for petitioning for a general assembly. More resources for the logistics of holding a GA can be found in *Why Strike? A Guide for Students*. Mark your calendars—the next planned strike dates are **March 11th to 15th**. Together, we have the power to make a difference.