

## Agencies have differing views on last week's budget

By Nick Fernandes

Not surprisingly, reaction is mixed to the Provincial budget brought down last week by Finance Minister Charles Sousa. And the varying opinions included several agencies that issued comments and statements shortly after the budget was introduced. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) commented that the new budget is not only insufficient to make a difference in people's lives, but also that it is actively insulting to thousands of people living with poverty. OCAP rep Liisa Schofield cited a disparity between the continued annual \$8.5 billion tax cuts for corporations with the \$14 rate increase and \$200 earnings exemption, saying social assistance rates would need to be increased by 55 per cent just to recover the lost ground of the past 18 years.

Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) President Sid Ryan was more optimistic about the social assistance measures, but said that continuing to uphold Dalton McGuinty's frugal policies will do nothing for economic growth and impose budget cuts on public services such as schools and hospitals. While Ryan praised the fact that the government of Premier Kathleen Wynne seems to be listening to Ontarians, he said that a more ambitious plan is needed.

The Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) and Communications Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) both voiced approval of the budget, stating that it reflects a change of gears for Ontario fiscal policy that will see a bigger emphasis in the well being of citizens and families. The leaders of the two unions also called attention to the influence the NDP had in forming the budget, citing this as an example of the potential of minority parties.

The Ontario Home Care Association welcomed the measures in the budget to increase funding for home care. The Association stated that the one per cent increase, which will account for \$700 million in two years, will go a long way toward providing support and care for aging Ontarians. The stance towards home care runs parallel to several other pieces of legislation, such as the Excellent Care for All Act and Seniors Strategy for Ontario.

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) called the budget a "mixed bag" in terms of commercial potential. OCC applauded measures that can improve competitiveness, such as the upholding of the Corporate Income Tax rate and the extension of the Capital Cost Allowance for manufacturers. But OCC also disapproved of the lack of a plan to overhaul service delivery business models, and voiced concerns over the government moving in to regulate auto insurance pricing without evidence of monopoly or collusion.

President Warren "Smokey" Thomas of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union directly referred to the budget as a continuation of the McGuinty legacy. He commented that the enhancements to public services and youth employment programs are funded entirely by cuts in other public services. "This budget is a missed opportunity to restore tax fairness in Ontario and make corporations part of the process," he said, voicing concern about Ontarians taking wage cuts or losing their jobs while corporations get tax breaks.

The largest teacher federation in Canada, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), welcomed the budget as movement away from past austerity policies. ETFO president Sam Hammond referred to the steps taken as "small but encouraging," calling attention to the jobs program to reduce Ontario's 50 per cent unemployment rate among youth and the social assistance programs for First Nations. "These initiatives remind everyone that government budgets are about making life better for people," Hammond said, adding that there's consensus among economists that the slashed budgets of the past have created "hardship."

The Canadian Youth Business Foundation (CYBF) applauded Sousa for introducing the two-year Youth Jobs Strategy that will invest nearly \$300 million into new jobs for young Ontarians. This part of the budget also sets its sights on fostering youth entrepreneurs, an emphasis that CYBF has praised as a job-creating and economy-enhancing strategy.

The College Student Alliance (CSA) has been working with the government to integrate measures addressing tuition, including a reworking of tuition deferral fees to be fairer to students. There is a change that students who receive OSAP funding will not be forced to pay tuition before it comes in. CSA has stated they will continue their work with the government in this respect, since the budget has not addressed other requests, such as the expansion of the 30 per cent Off Tuition Program. The budget's specific emphasis on "youth" is also thought to be problematic for mature students.

The Canadian Federation of Students stated the budget will, in fact, increase tuitions and does not do anything about the student debt crisis. According to Chairperson Sarah Jayne King, the budget continues a trend of privatization of Ontario colleges, as schools turn to corporations for funding due to public support of these institutions dropping below 50 per cent. "While students welcome investments to address youth unemployment, a real strategy for youth must address the high cost of tuition fees and record high levels of student debt," King said, calling on the opposition parties to push for action toward tuition fees, which she said 70 per cent

of Canadians are in favor of reducing.