Over 300,000 Albertans got a raise on October 1st.

More than three-quarters of them are at least 20 years old.

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We hope you enjoy this issue of our newsletter. It is intended to be a space to share stories and tools for advocacy. The Advocate is published three times a year.

Who We Are
Public Interest Alberta (PIA) is a province-wide organization focused on advocacy and education on public interest issues. Founded in 2004, PIA exists to foster an understanding of the importance of public services, institutions, and spaces in Albertans’ lives, and to build a network of organizations and individuals committed to advancing the public interest.

We believe that the primary responsibility of government is to advance the collective interests of the citizens of Alberta. This entails a commitment to accessibility, equity, inclusion, and democracy in our communities, institutions and society.

Executive Director
Joel French

Financial & Administrative Officer
Monica Walker

Communications Officer
Brett Lambert

Share Your Thoughts
Submit letters, articles and contributions, (which may be edited) for the next issue of The Advocate. Send all correspondence to:

PUBLIC INTEREST ALBERTA
604, 12323 Stony Plain Road NW
Edmonton, AB
T5N 3Y5

Ph: 780.420.0471
Email: office@pialberta.org
www.pialberta.org

If you want to receive The Advocate online instead, please contact our office.

Holiday Open House
Thursday, December 13, 2018
4:00 - 7:00 PM
6th Floor, 12323 Stony Plain Road

You’re invited to join the Alberta Labour History Institute, Alberta Workers’ Health Centre, Council of Canadians, Friends of Medicare, and Public Interest Alberta for our Open House!

Please RSVP by December 7th to: Monica Walker at 780-420-0471 or office@pialberta.org

Renew Your Membership Today!
You can renew your membership online at pialberta.org or fill out the information below and mail to:

Public Interest Alberta
604, 12323 Stony Plain Road NW, Edmonton, AB T5N 3Y5

1. ANNUAL INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP
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2. MONTHLY INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP
   I would like to contribute $ _________ monthly

3. ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERSHIP
   _____ Our office will be in touch to discuss options

Payment type
Credit Card _____ Cheque _____Cash _____
Credit card number ____________________________________________
Name on card ____________________________________________
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Name _______________________________________________________
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The former Progressive Conservative government loved to ride the revenue roller coaster. When oil prices were high it had the money to win votes by cutting taxes and settling contracts that usually kept labour groups from open revolt. When oil prices dropped, it was able to keep its fiscal conservative base happy by bringing in austerity measures, cutting government spending while quietly increasing out-of-pocket costs to Albertans using our public services.

There were problems when abundant oil revenue sparked inflation and led to huge increases in the cost of living. Albertans were not happy when austerity produced unemployment because of severe cuts to health care and education, but as long as these periods were relatively short, riding the roller coaster was a winning strategy that lasted for 44 years.

It all came to a screeching halt in early 2015 when oil prices took a precipitous drop with no sign of recovery in the foreseeable future. That was when talk of getting off the revenue roller coaster started to appear. Jim Prentice, then leader of the PC party, even suggested that it might be time to think of instituting a sales tax. But it was too late and Albertans took the unprecedented step of electing an NDP government.

With little experience in governing and having long been labelled the “tax and spend” party, the new government was unwilling to take the steps needed to get Alberta off the revenue roller coaster. Instead, it chose to run deficits as a way to avoid the drastic austerity that low oil prices would normally entail. How long deficit financing was sustainable would depend on how long it took for oil prices to recover.

While the current government’s strategy is understandable and has been relatively successful, it has done nothing to relieve the chronic under-funding of our health care, K-12 education, and post-secondary education systems. This strategy also ignores the fundamental question: should we be relying on revenue from non-renewable resources to operate government services?

How hard would it be to get off the roller coaster? The way to do it is demonstrated by Norway’s creation of a sovereign wealth fund in 1990. All revenue from oil resources was diverted directly into this fund, thereby avoiding the inflationary effect of such revenue on the economy. That fund has now grown to in excess of $1 trillion, or $193,000 per Norwegian citizen.

Alberta and Norway demonstrate two different ways of viewing how to best utilize the benefits of a major resource find. Should it be used as a way of putting the province at a competitive advantage by reducing the tax burden, thereby stimulating economic growth and development of the resource? Or, alternatively, should it take the long view and say that the non-renewable resources need to be developed in ways that will yield benefits even when the resource will inevitably be exhausted?

Alberta’s way has provided several decades of economic prosperity, but now it looks like the party is over. Norway’s way put the population in a position where it and its citizens are now the largest stock owners in Europe and in the future will own a substantial portion of the world’s economic assets.

Perhaps it is not too late for Alberta. We could still decide that all future revenue from oil and the oil sands will be salted away for future generations and that we, like all other provinces, will institute taxation measures that generate the revenue needed to sustain adequate and improved levels of public health care, education, and seniors care.

The big question: is there a political party with the courage and the will to implement such a policy and get us off the roller coaster? If not, the future doesn’t look too bright.
Alberta Low Wage Report

Over 300,000 Albertans, nearly 1 in 6, got a raise on October 1st

In the lead up to the Government of Alberta increasing the minimum wage from $13.60 to $15.00 per hour -- which took effect on October 1, 2018 -- Public Interest Alberta published the 2018 Alberta Low Wage Report.

Using data obtained from Statistics Canada’s monthly Labour Force Survey, the Low Wage Report shows who the majority of low wage workers are in the province, rebutting many of the commonly held myths on minimum wage employees.

More than 300,000 Alberta workers received a raise on October 1st because of the minimum wage increase.

More than 60 percent of workers who received a minimum wage raise are women.

More than three-quarters of workers who received a minimum wage raise are 20 years of age or older.

The Low Wage Report also offers detailed fact sheets on seven different regions of the province, which include Athabasca-Grande Prairie-Peace River, Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Red Deer, and Wood Buffalo-Cold Lake.

For more information and to download the fact sheets, visit www.pialberta.org/LowWage2018.

Why a non-partisan approach is important to Public Interest Alberta

By Joel French

Public Interest Alberta Executive Director

On a recent morning in October, I was surprised to wake up to a United Conservative Party (UCP) post on Twitter featuring Public Interest Alberta’s logo. The tweet claimed we, along with three other organizations, were “NDP-aligned” political action committees “ready to attack” the UCP and cited just over $100,000 we had raised from labour unions and reported to Elections Alberta under the province’s new third party advertising laws.

While the fundraising numbers are accurate, the rest simply has no basis in fact. As a staunchly non-partisan organization, we have always been focused on policy goals and not on supporting or opposing any political party. We determine what policy directions we believe the province needs to go, regardless of which party is in power, and educate Albertans about why it’s important and how it can happen. We did that successfully when we convinced the previous government to protect universal pharmaceutical coverage for seniors and when we, along with many other allies, convinced the current government to raise taxes on the wealthy and adopt a $15.00 per hour minimum wage.

The ironic thing about all this is that nearly all of our third party advertising funds have been spent on our Revenue Reno campaign, which advocates for Alberta to make fair changes to our tax system to raise significantly more revenue, with the goal of protecting and revitalizing important public services like health care and education. No party, including the NDP, has agreed with that message, but our aim is to inform Albertans about how important those issues are so no party can continue to ignore them.

There are other third party advertisers in the province taking a clearly partisan approach, including a group called “Shaping Alberta’s Future,” which has raised nearly $400,000 and is running television ads both attacking the NDP and supporting the UCP. The group is largely funded by a coalition of used car dealers and has met with UCP leader Jason Kenney to discuss their goals, which include taking away protections for Alberta workers and consumers.

Our goals could not be more different. We are focused on advancing the public interest and on informing Albertans not how to vote but how to hold all political parties to a higher standard in the pursuit of important public interest goals. Thanks to the support of labour unions, other organizations, and individuals across the province, we will continue to do this work effectively -- in non-partisan but very politically engaged ways.
Making Post-Secondary Education More Affordable
By Shifrah Gadamsetti
Council of Alberta University Students Executive Director

Bill 19 took the words right out of our mouths. “An Act to Improve the Affordability and Accessibility of Post-Secondary Education” succinctly captures the foundational pillars of advocacy for the Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS).

The details of this bill have encouraged students across the province to take pause and consider both the incredulity of its contents, while also realizing that these steps need to be taken in order to achieve a post-secondary system that remains competitive and sustainable.

The most impactful takeaways surround tuition regulation. Without a long-term solution following the tuition freeze, students remained fearful about their ability to afford and complete their education. Upon implementation, the bill will offer security to domestic students entering or continuing their education past the 2020-21 academic year, regulating increases by no more than the consumer price index. In the meantime, students will benefit from one last extension to the tuition freeze for the 2019-20 academic year.

CAUS has also advocated for protections that include international students, as the compounding socioeconomic factors surrounding their enrolment have often left them vulnerable on multiple fronts. These provincial regulations take additional steps to protect international students and keep them from experiencing arbitrary increases to their tuition. Moving forward, they will be guaranteed the cost of their entire education at the offer of admission, attracting more international students who enhance the quality of education with a wealth of knowledge and diverse experience.

Additionally, student representation has always been important. In fact, student representation and advocacy is directly responsible for Bill 19. With changes to institutional governance structures that more equitably reflect students, the primary stakeholder group, we are now able to more effectively and meaningfully engage in decision-making that affects our everyday reality.

Overall, we’re thrilled to see these changes come forward and gain support across all stakeholder groups, but that doesn’t mean our work here is done. Regulations surrounding tuition and fees are only one part of addressing financial barriers for students, and we still believe that improvements to the student financial aid system in Alberta will have the biggest impact on the most vulnerable.

Last but not least, we know the devil hides in the details, and CAUS is eager to learn more about what the regulations surrounding mandatory non-instructional fees will yield. Consequently, all of this will amount to nothing if we don’t see commitments for supplementary efforts such as backfill funding and adequate operational grants to maintain the quality of education.

Nonetheless, this is an incredible win for students across the province and a testament to the unrelenting dedication of student movements, one that we are proud to lead!
The perils of “choice” in public education

By Carolyn Blasetti

Support Our Students Alberta Executive Director

For some time, Albertans have been concerned with the privatization of education. The concerns centre around the equity of publicly funding schools that charge tuition in the tens of thousands of dollars. People argue further that we must protect public schools from the threat of privatization. But the truth of the matter is privatization is already here and it’s already operating under the public umbrella. We’ve built our system around a competition model, where the more students a school has, the more funding the school gets.

Only four percent of students in Alberta attend private schools, but proponents of private schools believe that education should be treated as a free market and as a commodity. These education “reformers,” like other free market defenders, are not content with four percent of the market. Education reformers need to sell privatization to the remaining 96 percent to capture more market share. Cracking that code means getting the general public on side with schools that exclude and practice selectivity. That schools may or may not charge tuition is irrelevant. The slow and steady sell to privatize education has come to public education in Alberta via exclusivity.

Exclusivity in education

What does exclusivity look like in Alberta? The most obvious example is charter schools. Charter schools receive 100 percent per student public dollars to run schools that are privately operated. Charter schools do not report to a publicly elected school board and they have the legislated right to deny students access. They do this under the clever marketing strategy of offering exclusive programs. Programs that meet your child’s unique needs, programs deemed too rigorous for some children, programs that require auditions, interviews, private psychoeducational assessments. Once Alberta opened the door to charter schools, we opened the door to the privatization of the public system.

“Choice” as a barrier for marginalized groups

Embedded in programs of choice -- including the ones found in public schools across Alberta -- are systemic barriers that consistently exclude children of colour, children living in poverty, disabled children, children living in trauma, and newcomer children. These programs often require applications, religious affiliation, auditions, and extensive transportation fees. English language learners are often counselled out of language programs. Children with learning disabilities are also turned away from programs under the public umbrella that are deemed too rigorous or too academic. The idea that French immersion is viewed as private school under the public umbrella is a nationwide concern. Academic streaming and disproportionate school suspensions are a lived reality for children of colour across this province. These systemic biases and structures are keeping marginalized children out of programs of choice while simultaneously allowing these same selective schools to skim the cream; wealthy, affluent, and educated students. This kind of exclusivity is the face of privatization under the public umbrella.

Perpetuating classroom inequities

We have let choice and exclusion permeate our public system in the same way that fundraising has escalated to unbelievable proportions without any discussion or acknowledgement of the inequities this presents. Affluent, progressive families have enjoyed the perceived benefits of accessing choice. After all, choice is in their neighbourhoods, choice lets their children in, choice tends to have all of the resources and fundraising capabilities to create the best experience for their children. And while the advantaged have been hoarding resources, those left with no choice at all are disproportionately children of color, children in poverty, children with disabilities, newcomer children, and English language learners. (continued on page 7)
Public education as the great equalizer

The original intent of public education was to be the great equalizer, and its greatest strength to democracy was that it would be open and available to all children. Today across Alberta, public schools proudly declare their school is not for all children. Today’s public schools are special and exclusive. We have been marketed individualism so well that public schools practice exclusionary acceptance procedures every single day across this province. That is how education reformers sell privatization under the public umbrella. You start to believe in individualization, you believe in othering, you believe that your child deserves something more or different than other children. You are okay with accessing your privilege to obtain that even if other children do not. This has been the greatest win of conservatives around the globe and is referred to in many places as educational apartheid.

Public schools are not public schools because they are named that. Public schools are public when they accept all children, when they are barrier free, provide the same rich and diverse experience in low income neighbourhoods as they do in affluent neighborhoods. Public schools that exclude children on any basis are not public schools, they are wolves in sheep’s clothing. We must stop defending for the sake of defending and start critically analyzing, and defining universal public education. Until every child can access what the most affluent can, we will not have a universally accessible public education. The most affluent of our society would never consider choosing a music education over a science one, an athletic program over a language one, which is the clearest indication that choice is not the pinnacle we’ve been sold.

Choice is a myth perpetuated by and participated in by those privileged enough to access it. Universality should be the goal. Only universality can return us to the foundation of a public education built around our most marginalized, that levels the playing field, that strengthens our democracy, and creates engaged citizens.
Hate Free Edmonton, a recently launched grassroots campaign, strives to make Edmonton a space free of hate, discrimination, and dehumanizing ideologies of any kind.

With the rise of active white supremacist and hate groups in Canada and across the world, the initiative aims to push back against these voices by developing spaces free of hatred in Edmonton.

Hate Free Edmonton is calling on anyone who administers a space or runs a business in Edmonton to commit to putting up a #HateFreeYeg sticker on your door or window, which will be provided free of charge.

We are pleased to announce that Public Interest Alberta has agreed to take the pledge to create a space free of hate.

Creating this space means adopting a zero tolerance policy towards:
• Racism
• Sexism
• Homophobia
• Transphobia
• Ageism
• Ableism
• Body shaming

To learn more about Hate Free Edmonton and to sign on to the pledge, please visit www.hatefreeyeg.com