

Canadian high schoolers paid \$2,000 to take military training course

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With the enthusiastic support of the Saskatchewan government, the Canadian military is partnering with Regina's Public and Catholic school boards to provide basic military training to high school students.

Students who complete the new Canadian Army Primary Reserve Co-op Program will receive \$2,000 and two high school credits. According to a Saskatchewan government press release, upon completion of the program students will be eligible to be enrolled in the regular Canadian Army Reserve, which the Canadian military describes "as a part-time, fully integrated component of the Canadian Army."

Currently the "Reserve Co-op Program" is only offered in Regina. But there are plans to extend it to other cities and towns in Saskatchewan.

The introduction of what is for all intents and purposes a military recruitment campaign as part of Saskatchewan's school curriculum exemplifies the Canadian elite's embrace of militarism. Until recently, the Canadian Armed Forces was popularly presented as "peacekeepers." Now Prime Minister Harper describes Canada as a "warrior nation" and routinely advances the reactionary and patently false claim that Canadians owe their "liberty" to the military.

Since the end of the last century, Canada, under Liberal and Conservative governments has joined one US-led war after another, including against Yugoslavia in 1999, Afghanistan and Libya. Currently, Canadian warplanes are bombing Iraq and Syria. And last week, the Conservative government, which has already deployed planes to Eastern Europe and ships to the Black Sea to join in the NATO build-up against Russia, announced it would be sending 200 Canadian military trainers to Ukraine.

The \$2,000 incentive for participating in Coop the program is primarily targeted at low-income, working-

class youth who would otherwise have no interest in joining the military, but find it increasingly difficult to find a career path or a way out of low-paying part-time jobs. While Saskatchewan's right-wing government, a close ally of the Conservative government in Ottawa, is lavishing resources on military training, parents in Regina complain that they are forced to pay hundreds of dollars extra so that their children can take instruction in enriched classes like "Media and Communications" or "Environmental Studies."

Colonel Ross Ermel, a commander of the 38th Canadian Brigade Group, which comprises reserve units from Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario, told reporters, "We're always looking for innovative ways to expand our ability to connect with Canadians, to find new recruits and make sure we remain sustainable in the long term."

He touted a career in the Reserves as an "excellent opportunity" to gain skills and "experience service to Canada." As the Canadian military's website notes, "Since the year 2000, more than 4,000 Primary Reservists have been deployed in Canadian Armed Forces operations in Afghanistan, Haiti, and other international expeditionary operations."

Colonel Ermel went on to provide his own chilling perspective of never-ending war. "We live in a world where conflict is perennial," he said. "Operations that the military conducts run the gamut from full, high intensity conflicts, to humanitarian operations and domestic operations." The last reference is especially ominous. While this is little discussed publicly, one of the core functions of the military is to "provide aid to civil power," i.e., suppress civil unrest.

The Co-op Reserve program, which took in its first cohort in February, gives its high school student participants the opportunity to earn two credits: a core

credit in Canadian history and an elective credit for the military training part of the program.

While the core credit is listed as a Canadian history course, the curriculum will be integrated with the Reserve agenda so that it buttresses militarist thinking by glorifying Canada's military interventions over the past century, including its role as a major belligerent in the two imperialist world wars. The military training course will involve 23 full days of basic training, including how to handle a firearm, physical fitness, military drills, and first aid.

Military officials are justifying the program by framing it as a leadership-training program and by emphasizing the Reserves' role in responding to natural disasters. However, what is termed as a leadership-training opportunity for youths can more accurately be described as a crass tool used to condition them to submit to Canada's role in waging imperialist war and to uncritically obey their authorities.

Further exposing themselves as proponents of Canada's growing militarism, Saskatchewan's social-democratic NDP backed the program when it was presented to the legislature. "Certainly the NDP is supportive and proud and eternally grateful for the Canadian Armed Forces. The program presents an opportunity for students to learn about the Canadian Armed Forces first hand," gushed NDP MLA (Member of the Legislature) Trent Wotherspoon.

Despite the program having gone forward, various pacifist organizations have expressed their opposition. PeaceQuest Regina and the Regina Peace Council started a petition in favour of withdrawing the program from the public high school system. Peace activists criticised the program's role in endorsing violence as an appropriate method for conflict resolution, arguing that respect and discipline can be taught in ways that don't involve endorsing militarism. Many remember the days, prior to the growth of the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States and Canada, when it was common in Canadian high schools for students to be required to participate in military "cadet" training.

Resistance to the program has also come from parents and teachers of the Catholic school board. In mid-February, the Regina Catholic School Division annual elector's meeting passed a motion informing Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall that it does not want a military training program in its high schools. Those

who were against the program argued that peace studies should replace the current military curriculum, stating that a program that teaches students how to handle firearms, and submit unquestionably to authority has the opposite effect of teaching students how to become leaders. However, despite resounding opposition from the school community, the board is not legally obliged to enforce the expressed will of its constituents.

In a statement that points to the strong backing for the military training program at the highest levels of the Saskatchewan government, Catholic School Board Chair Rob Bresciani told the *Regina Leader-Post* that the motion had put the board in an "awkward" position, because it needs a good working relationship with the provincial government.

The Wall government's inviting of the military into schools is part of a broader initiative in which school boards are being instructed to partner with industry and other employers.

At the same time, citing the fall in oil prices and government oil royalties and tax revenues, the provincial government has slashed education funding and social spending geared towards youths and families. In the budget tabled last month, the government reduced eligibility to a program that supplements the incomes of low-income families and cut the "active families benefit" which provided subsidies for parents to enrol their children in sport and art programs. Support for postsecondary students has also been slashed.



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