

Toronto Mayoralty race pushes right-wing agenda

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According to press reports over this past weekend, four high-profile candidates in the upcoming election for the mayor of Toronto are scrambling to cobble together an “anyone-but-Rob Ford” agreement that seeks to head-off the burgeoning candidacy of the right-wing city councilor. The move comes in the wake of two polls showing a significant lead for Ford, shocking City Hall’s traditional liberal political establishment.

With only five weeks remaining until the October 25th election, a Nanos Research poll gave Ford a whopping 24 percentage point lead over his nearest rival, former Ontario Liberal cabinet minister and deputy premier George Smitherman. Another poll by *Toronto Star* and Angus Reid gave Ford a 13 point edge. Both surveys showed a steady increase of support for Ford over previous months, whilst the campaigns of the other top four candidates either lost ground or stagnated. In the two polls, Ford garnered respectively the support of 46 percent and 39 percent of decided voters. As much as a third of the electorate is still undecided.

Ford’s unlikely political rise has been compared to that of former US 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Widely condemned in mainstream political circles as an ill-informed, incompetent buffoon, Ford, a multi-millionaire businessman, has sought to mobilize support on the basis of a right-wing populist campaign that seeks to portray him as the champion of the “ordinary Joe” fighting the arrogant, trendy downtown political elites who drain away “our” tax dollars in wasteful spending. Over the years Ford buttressed his blunt anti-tax and pro-law-and-order nostrums with statements attacking immigrants, gays, the homeless and unionized city workers.

Ford’s campaign has won effusive support from two of Toronto’s right-wing daily newspapers—the *National Post* and the *Toronto Sun*. The *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of Canada’s Bay Street financial elite, has thus far refrained from endorsing his candidacy. A recent column by the *Globe*’s Marcus Gee summed up the ruling class’ concern about the competency and political

intelligence of candidate Ford. In “Can we trust Rob Ford, a guy who gets his numbers wrong?”, Gee openly wonders whether the fulminating demagogue is up to the task at hand—i.e. imposing major cuts in public and social services on working people in the midst of a global economic crisis. Anti-Ford columnists and commentators in Toronto’s other mainstream media outlets have lamented the fact that none of the other “serious” contenders have been able to provide the proper campaign “messaging” needed to cut into Ford’s considerable lead.

In an effort to outflank him on the question of “fiscal responsibility,” the other major candidates have all shifted their own campaigns further to the right, but without making headway in the polls. George Smitherman, previously the preferred candidate in ruling circles, is offering a platform indistinguishable from Ford’s on most major issues. Like Ford, he advocates jettisoning already approved plans to expand the city’s transit system, supports hiring more police, and proposes cutting social programs and investigating contracting-out possibilities. Smitherman has been weighed down by his association with an increasingly unpopular Liberal provincial government. He was a key member of Premier Dalton McGuinty’s government—a regime that left in place the central elements of Mike Harris’ US Republican-inspired “Common Sense Revolution” and which has now announced a new austerity drive. This includes freezing the wages of one million public sector workers for two years, while slashing corporate taxes and imposing a significant tax hike on ordinary people with the HST. Smitherman is further weighed down by his catastrophic administration as Health Minister of the province’s attempt to place all medical records on an electronic database that saw hundreds of millions of dollars awarded to no-bid contractors who produced few results.

The candidate currently in a distant third place, Deputy Mayor Joe Pantalone, is a life-long supporter of the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). He is backed by outgoing Mayor David Miller and federal NDP leader Jack Layton. His campaign manager is none other than John

Laschinger, a perennial back-room advisor to pillars of the Conservative Party establishment since the 1970s. Pantalone has alienated significant sections of his own former base of support amongst working people with his backing of Miller's demands for public service concession contracts and his vote to commend the brutal record of the Toronto police in repressing the protests at last June's G20 summit. Pantalone, taking his cue from Ford—"You are either with the Police or against them"—has refused to make the police and government attacks on democratic rights on the streets of Toronto this past summer an issue in the campaign. Further, Pantalone has backed the generous property tax breaks, grants, subsidies and grossly undervalued business land assessments that Miller has provided to the big commercial developers. These policies have robbed city coffers of hundreds of millions and led to cuts in snow clearance, parks and recreation, and daycare. Whilst taxes on big business continue to be reduced, working people have been presented with a water tax hike of 9 percent, a new vehicle registration tax, a looming garbage fee increase of 3 percent and a steady increase in home-owner property taxes.

The election campaign and surrounding developments must be taken as a warning that whoever ends up in the mayor's chair after October 25, Toronto is entering a new era of class confrontation and social strife. The city's ruling elite (which forms a good part of the Canadian bourgeoisie) is intent on restructuring class relations in the municipality as part of a wider push to do the same in Ontario and across Canada. In the case of Toronto, this was already demonstrated by the 2009 city workers' strike, where the ruling class mounted a rabid attack on public sector contracts. Then, when sitting Mayor Miller failed to push through concessions of the scope and scale demanded by financial circles, Toronto's elite made it clear they would oppose his re-election. Soon after, Miller meekly announced that he would be stepping down at the conclusion of his term. Clearly the populist campaign of Rob Ford is being used to press for a further shift in class relations. It has already moved the agendas of all the major candidates further rightwards and placed off limits any discussion in the press or in the televised political debates of measures to address the burgeoning social crisis in Canada's most populous city.

In the wake of the 2008 global financial collapse, unemployment in the Greater Toronto area increased to 10.7 percent. Even after federal government stimulation spending, the official jobless rate for August 2010 hovers at 10 percent, the second highest urban unemployment rate in the country. Estimates put almost 600,000 people in the Toronto region at or below the poverty line. These conditions have produced a leap in the city's welfare

caseload by more than 15 percent. In December, 2008, the caseload was 78,301 accounting for 135,506 people, and one year later was 91,544 or 156,581 people. On any given night, an estimated 5,000 people sleep in shelters or on city streets. In 2009, 33,000 people were homeless sometime over the course of the year. For those who do have jobs, the average hourly wage has been virtually flat for two years, coming in at \$22.86 per hour in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Rental rates are so high that a quarter of a million households spend at least 30 percent of their monthly income just to keep a roof over their heads. And of those households, fifty thousand are forced to devote half of their monthly income to housing. Meanwhile, Toronto rents continue to rise at more than twice the national average. Yet despite these harrowing trends, none of the pundits of the mainstream press—let alone the mayoral candidates—have given even token attention to the increasing misery and desperation of whole swathes of the city's population. The election in Toronto must be seen within the context of an immense social crisis and growing economic distress across the country and internationally. The candidacy of Rob Ford is a distorted reflection of the general growth of popular anger and disillusionment with the entire political system, with Ford cynically packaging himself as anti-establishment.

This is not to say that the present success of the Ford campaign represents the emergence of a mass popular right-wing movement. Figures like Ford are thrust into the forefront precisely to counter the general shift of the population away from bourgeois "politics as usual" and are able to rally significant support only to the extent that the working class is politically suppressed by the social-democrats of the NDP and their supporters in the trade union bureaucracy. The growth of popular discontent with all the representatives of big business, fueled by continuing unemployment and increasing poverty, must and will find political expression in a mass movement against a system that places the interests of the financial and corporate elite above those of working people.



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