Right-wing populist Ford elected Toronto mayor

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Right-wing populist city councilman Rob Ford was elected mayor of Toronto, Canada's most populous city, Monday night, garnering 47 percent of the vote. His main adversaries, former provincial Liberal Deputy Premier George Smitherman and Joe Pantalone, Toronto's sitting deputy mayor, garnered 36 percent and 12 percent of the vote respectively. Almost half of those eligible to vote stayed away from the polls.

In his victory speech, Ford reiterated his determination to impose a righting agenda focused on slashing the city budget, declaring that "Toronto is now open for business" and terming his election a "clear call from the taxpayers."

Ford has pledged to privatize city garbage collection, cut at least 1,500 other positions from the city payroll, restrain wages for all municipal workers except those in the police and fire departments, curtail the right to strike for front-line paramedics, slash spending on social programs, and end a "fair wages" policy at city hall that requires all municipal contractors to pay union wage rates.

Ford's unlikely political rise has been compared to that of former US 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin and certain Tea Party candidates in next week's American mid-term elections. A city councilor since 2000, Ford gained notoriety for his law-and-order and anti-tax bombast and for frequent reactionary swipes, targeting immigrants, gays, artists, the homeless and unionized city workers.

When Ford announced his mayoral campaign, he was widely dismissed in mainstream political circles as an ill-informed, incompetent buffoon. But the multi-millionaire businessman succeeded in mobilizing support on the basis of a populist "Stop the Gravy Train" campaign. He portrayed himself as the champion of the "ordinary Joe" fighting the arrogant, trendy downtown political elites who drain away "our" tax dollars in wasteful spending. His one-note campaign hit a nerve amongst sections of the city's population reeling from the impact of the economic crisis and fed up with accounts of councilors availing themselves of free golf, zoo and transit passes, taxpayer funded retirement parties and other perks.

Once Ford's campaign began to gain traction in pre-election polls, his candidacy was enthusiastically promoted by much of Toronto's big business establishment. The *National Post* and the *Toronto Sun* endorsed Ford and several of the *Globe and Mail*'s star columnists lavishly praised his candidacy. Right-wing Conservative stalwarts like federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty and former Ontario Premier Mike Harris also lent Ford their support.

Toronto's other two dailies, the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*, backed Smitherman. But this seeming divide within the ruling class was more a matter of form than content. All were agreed that whoever won the election would be required to ruthlessly wield an axe to the wages and social programs won by the working class over decades of bitter struggles. The editorialists who backed Smitherman simply feared that Ford, a bumbling suburban councilman who has had several run-ins with the law and has frequently alienated fellow right-wingers on City Council, lacks the political acumen to force through massive spending and service cuts.

While endorsing Smitherman, the *Globe*, the traditional voice of Toronto's Bay Street financial houses, employed Ford-type rhetoric, declaring that Toronto faces "structural problems," that "the city employees' unions can no longer be appeased" and that Toronto's fiscal crisis cannot be addressed merely through "attrition, … the mere passage of time, or by restraining new spending, or cutting here and there."

But the *Globe* expressed fears that Ford's demagogy could quickly rebound against him and noted that for all his right wing pronouncements about fiscal responsibility, Ford's plans "have gaps and inconsistencies." That is, he brazenly lied to the electorate, claiming he could slash taxes and fees, while preserving, even enhancing, essential public services.

Writing the day after the election, the *Toronto Star* opined, Ford "needs to convert his mantra of 'stop the gravy train' into a coherent fiscal platform that goes beyond just cutting councilors' expenses, which make up less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the city's $9 billion budget. During the campaign, Ford promised tax cuts (elimination of the land transfer and vehicle registration fees) that will put a $250 million hole in the city budget, on top of a shortfall of $500 million that is already estimated for next year. He also said he would expand the police budget by adding 100 more officers. The combination of lower revenues and increased spending on police will put enormous pressure on every other municipal service, from parks to road repairs to transit. Balancing the budget without gutting these services will be a challenge."

The *National Post* was blunt in parrying these reservations, arguing that change is so urgently needed that new methods are required. "Policy-wise," declared the *Post*, "Toronto very much needs a proverbial bull in the china shop. A great many precious,

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expensive things at City Hall need shattering."

From the standpoint of the ruling class, what requires "shattering" is the very social position of the working class in the city.

It wants the budget to be balanced on the backs of working people already reeling from the impact of the global economic crisis and for the campaign mounted by all levels of government in recent decades, and especially since the turn of the century, to reduce taxes on business and the rich and super rich to be intensified.

In this regard, note should be taken of the corporate elite's utter hypocrisy over taxes. If Ford's "anti-tax" demagogy cut muster with sections of working people, it is because for the vast majority of the population real incomes have stagnated over the past quarter century, while taxes and user fees have risen and the quality of government services has deteriorated

But for the rich—for the Fords and the barons of Bay Street who loudly proclaim that the tax burden is unsupportable—the opposite is the case. Their real incomes have soared due to massive rises in executive compensation and investment gains, even as the tax rates on their high incomes and capital gains have been massively scaled back.

In the election campaign, Ford's demagoguery went all but unchallenged by his opponents. Both Smitherman and Pantalone quickly adapted to the councilman's right-wing nostrums. Neither felt it necessary to place growing poverty and financial insecurity amongst whole swathes of the city's population on their electoral agendas. Both men, taking their cue from Ford–"You are either with the Police or against them"—refused to make the police and government attacks on democratic rights on the streets of Toronto this past summer an issue in the campaign. Indeed, Pantalone joined his mentor, outgoing social-democratic Mayor David Miller, in leading Council in voting to "commend" the police for their brutal response to the G20 protests.

In an effort to outflank Ford on the question of "fiscal responsibility," Smitherman offered a platform indistinguishable from his opponent's on most major issues. Like Ford, he advocated jettisoning already approved plans to expand the city's transit system, called for the hiring of more police, and proposed cutting socials programs and investigating contracting-out possibilities.

But Smitherman was weighed down by his association with an increasingly unpopular Liberal provincial government. He was a key member of Premier Dalton McGuinty's administration—a regime that has 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 was further compromised 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.

For his part, Deputy Mayor Joe Pantalone, a life-long supporter of the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), smugly campaigned on a status quo platform even as tens of thousands of Torontonians have lost their jobs under the impact of the recession. While Pantalone was backed by federal NDP leader Jack Layton, he sought to reach out to prominent supporters of the major big business parties. His campaign manager was none other than John Laschinger, a perennial back-room advisor to pillars of the Conservative Party establishment since the 1970s.

Pantalone also backed the generous property tax breaks, grants, subsidies and grossly undervalued business land assessments that Mayor Miller provided to the big commercial developers. These policies 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 garbage fee increase of 3 percent and a steady increase in home-owner property taxes.

Ford's election win must be taken as a warning that 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.

The victory of Rob Ford will be used to press for a further shift in class relations to the right. Already the corporate media is claiming that the election of Ford—who actually won the vote of no more than one in four eligible voters—is proof that the Canadian public favors austerity policies.

According to the *Globe*, the federal Liberals have decided in response to Ford's election to scale back still further their modest proposals for increased government spending. Reported Wednesday's *Globe*, "[I]nsiders said the Liberals will abandon nanny state proposals like universal child care and put forward boutique proposal that would cost relatively little and target areas where many Canadians are hurting."

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