Judge orders dismissal of Toronto's right-wing populist mayor

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An Ontario Superior Court judge has ordered Toronto Mayor Rob Ford to vacate the office on December 10 after finding him guilty on conflict of interest charges.

A notorious right-winger and staunch ally of federal Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Ford blamed his conviction on “left-wing politics” and vowed to fight for his job as mayor of Canada's most populous city. Yesterday Ford’s lawyers applied for a stay of the dismissal order pending adjudication of his appeal of the guilty verdict.

In all likelihood, Ford will be able to remain as Toronto’s mayor at least until January when a three-member panel of Ontario’s Divisional Court will hear his appeal.

Elected in October 2010, Ford presided over sweeping cuts to the city budget and the imposition of concessionary contracts on city workers that gut job security and pave the way for the privatization of essential services.

A multi-millionaire businessman and mayor of a city that is home to much of Canada’s financial elite, Ford railed against “entitled” city workers and threatened to hire strikebreakers if they balked at the city’s concession demands.

Ford’s ability to impose an historic defeat on city workers in last winter’s contract negotiations, however, had little if anything to do with his political acumen. He is a blustering know-nothing—a reactionary buffoon—whose mercurial temperament and incompetence have alienated even many fellow rightwing councilors.

Ford owed his “success” in imposing austerity to the trade unions and the union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP). They sabotaged the city workers’ struggle because they feared it would result in a headlong collision between the working class and the entire big business establishment and their state.

The unions deliberately separated the opposition to the budget cuts from the city workers’ struggle against concessions and contracting out; then told the city workers that they had no choice but to capitulate before the Ford administration’s demands because they were “isolated.”

The issue that led to Ford’s dismissal did not involve gross corruption, but was one of many occasions in which the mayor flouted city rules to promote the family business or his personal interests.

Ford was repeatedly offered the chance to make amends, but cavalierly refused to do so. Ultimately, Ford’s legal defence rested on the claim that after well over a decade in city politics he had never so much as glanced at the city’s conflict-of-interest rules. In rejecting this defence, Judge Hackland noted that the City Council Speaker had explicitly warned the mayor that he would be in a conflict of interest if he voted to reject an order from the city’s Integrity Commissioners that he repay $3,150 he had collected from city lobbyists for his football team, but Ford chose to ignore the speaker’s advice.

In his ruling, Justice Hackland was scathing of Ford’s conduct: “The respondent’s actions were characterized by ignorance of the law and a lack of diligence in securing professional advice, amounting to willful blindness. As such, I find his actions are incompatible with an error in judgment.”

Nevertheless, the judge expressed reservations about the severity of the penalty—removal from office. But that is the minimum penalty prescribed under Ontario’s Municipal Conflict of Interest Act.

Much of Toronto’s bourgeois “left” have celebrated the ruling unseating Ford as a “victory” and are hailing the “left activists” and well-known civil rights lawyer,

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Clayton Ruby, who mounted the conflict-of-interest case. Typical was an article, “Ford removed, the fight against austerity continues,” posted on the union-supported “radical” website” *rabble.ca*. It claims that the court ruling is a victory in the fight against austerity and due in part to pressure from below.

This is poppycock. Ford has not been brought down by the working class, but by a judge enforcing a law, parts of which may be found unconstitutional. Moreover, as attested by the favorable reception accorded Justice Hackland’s verdict from the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*, it is evident that important sections of the ruling elite believe that Ford has outlived his usefulness.

In their view, not only has Ford mismanaged important multibillion dollar files, such as public transit and traffic congestion. They fear his scarcely veiled anti-immigrant and anti-gay views will rebound against their plans to slash and privatize public services. For them, Ford’s removal provides an opportunity to fashion a more effective big business administration.

The demonization of Ford by much of Toronto’s middle-class pseudo-left has served to obscure the real issues raised by the escalating assault on the working class—above all the complicity of the unions and the NDP.

The union and NDP-backed civic administration of David Miller, which preceded Ford’s, was at the beck and call of the Bay Street financial elite. After failing to administer a demonstrable defeat on city workers in 2009, Miller responded to criticism from big business by announcing he would not seek re-election.

Subsequently, the millionaire Ford was able to exploit resentment over rising social inequality, declining living standards, and rising tax rates for working and middle-class people by posturing as an outsider and spokesman for “working Joes.”

But the issues go far beyond Toronto and the civic political arena.

Since the eruption in 2008 of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression, the unions and NDP have moved still further right, accepting sweeping contract concessions, advocating a coalition with the Liberals—the Canadian elite’s traditional party of government— and working to refashion the NDP as the ruling class’ alternate “left” party of government.

The NDP, now led by the ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair, is according to a recent article in the *National Post*, trying to flummox the Harper Conservatives by forsaking “knee-jerk opposition” in favor of collaborating with what is the most rightwing government in modern Canadian history. “It's hard to set up the NDP as a threat to civilization when they keep voting for the government's legislation,” writes the *Post*'s John Ivison.

In Ontario there is a clear division of labour between the three establishment parties—all of which accept the need for brutal austerity measures aimed at resolving the province's fiscal crisis at the expense of the working class. The unions and NDP point to the vicious rightwing measures advocated by Ford and Ontario Conservative leader Tim Hudak to intimidate the working class, so as to justify their collaboration with the Liberals in imposing social spending cuts and a public sector wage freeze. Of course, when it came to the actual fight against Ford, the unions quickly surrendered.

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