

# Canada's Conservatives to intensify assault on working people

Dylan Lubao and Keith Jones  
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Canada's Conservative government laid out plans to intensify the big business assault on the working class in last week's Throne Speech, the address wherein the government outlines its agenda for a new session of parliament

The speech committed the government to broadening and deepening its austerity drive. Already the Conservatives had pledged to cut more than \$55 billion from discretionary spending over five years: slashed Employment Insurance coverage and benefits, especially for seasonal workers; and imposed a health-care funding formula under which the federal contribution to Medicare, Canada's public health insurance system, will be reduced by tens of billions of dollars over an eight-year period beginning in 2016.

In the Throne Speech, the government reiterated its vow to eliminate the federal budget deficit by 2015. In addition, it pledged to reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio to pre-2008 recession levels by 2017, to freeze the overall federal operating budget—thereby necessitating, due to inflation and population growth, further job and service cuts—and to introduce “balanced budget legislation.”

Since 2000, federal Liberal and Conservative governments have aggressively slashed taxes on big business and high income-earners. This has been done with a dual purpose: to massively redistribute the national income in favour of the capitalist elite and the most privileged sections of the middle class; and to ensure the government is starved of fiscal resources so as to maintain the pressure for further cuts to public services.

Last week's Throne Speech pledged that no sooner is the budget balanced than the government will introduce a new raft of tax cuts in the name of providing “greater tax relief for families.”

The Conservatives, led by neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, have repeatedly said that they intend to introduce income-splitting for tax purposes and, indeed have already instituted it for seniors. Through this regressive tax scheme, a family with one highly paid spouse can split that income with the other spouse. This reduces the overall income tax rate and overwhelmingly favours families with

one highly-paid breadwinner.

In the Throne Speech, the Conservatives also pledged to accelerate privatization and deregulation. No attempt was made to square this with a promise to improve transport safety or with the speech's opening line—a request for a moment's “silent reflection” for the 47 people killed in the July train explosion in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec.

The worst Canadian rail disaster in a century, the Lac-Mégantic tragedy was a direct consequence of government cost-cutting and deregulation, including the introduction of industry “self-regulation”.

The Throne Speech included a pledge to bring forward legislation to amend the Public Service Labour Relations, the legislation that governs collective bargaining in the federal public sector, with the purported aim of ensuring that the “Public Service is affordable, modern and high-performing.”

While no further details were provided, there can be no question but that the government intends to attack federal public sector workers' bargaining rights. In the past two-and-a-half years, the Conservatives have repeatedly illegalized strikes, including against the Crown-owned Canada Post and private sector giants Air Canada and CP Rail.

The government has already unilaterally increased federal workers' pension contributions and raised the retirement age for new hires in the federal public sector. It has also served notice—and this was reaffirmed in the Throne Speech—that it intends to slash federal workers' illness and disability coverage, as well as force through other major concessions, including possibly eliminating or at least scaling back defined-pension benefits. The government also intends to impose more demanding “performance objectives” to intensify the pace of work, with federal workers who fail to meet the new objectives threatened with rapid dismissal.

Bringing public sector workers to heel is seen as a necessary step in bolstering the drive of big business to slash workers' wages and benefits and to break worker resistance to the dismantling of public services.

Citing a “lack of key infrastructure,” the Conservatives

pledged to redouble their efforts to build extensive oil pipelines from the Alberta tar sands and to facilitate other northern resource extraction projects. The government tried to dress this up as a means of helping the country's impoverished aboriginal population. The reality is the government has shown a callous indifference to the native peoples, as underscored by their refusal to even raise per capita education spending for Indians living on reserves to that of the provinces (who elsewhere have the primary responsibility for education.)

In the lead-up to the Throne Speech, the media was full of discussion about the government's new "pro-consumer" agenda. The proposed measures, many of them lifted from the trade union-supported NDP, include slight reductions to wireless telephone and banking costs.

The Conservatives tepid "pro-consumer" measures are a transparent attempt to provide political cover for their big business agenda. The negligible savings are more than offset by tariff increases on foreign goods from "developing nations" passed in the last federal budget.

The Conservatives used their Throne Speech to reaffirm their commitment to a massive rearmament program that calls for hundreds of billions to be spent on new weapons and weapons systems over the next two decades and to promote their Canada First military procurement strategy. Adopted earlier this year, "Canada First" calls for the government to prioritize the "economic benefits" of its military build-up, with the aim of boosting the profits of Canadian-based arms manufacturers and making Canada's "defence sector" one of its leading export industries.

In building up Canada's armed forces and deploying it in US-led neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Libya, the Conservatives are, just as in their socioeconomic agenda, only treading further down the trail that was blazed by the Liberal governments of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin that preceded them.

Apart from pledging to pursue free trade pacts on multiple fronts, including with the European Union and through Canada's participation in the US-led, anti-Chinese Trans Pacific Partnership, the Throne Speech had virtually nothing to say about Canada's foreign policy, with one pivotal exception.

Under the subheading "Promoting Canadian Values," the government declared, "Our government defends Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, the lone outpost of freedom and democracy." The Conservatives have repeatedly declared their government to be Israel's staunchest ally. In line with the arch-reactionary policies of Benjamin Netanyahu's government, the Harper Conservatives continued to support the Mubarak dictatorship even after US President Obama had deemed it politic to call for the

Egyptian dictator to resign and have frequently echoed Israel's bellicose threats against Iran. Israel's Minister of Strategic Affairs Yuval Steinitz visited Ottawa Monday, while on his way to Washington, to solicit the Harper government's support in urging the US not to withdraw any of the punishing economic sanctions it has imposed on Iran, until Tehran has entirely dismantled its nuclear energy program.

Despite its unabashedly pro-business and right-wing orientation, the speech was regarded by the most powerful sections of Canadian capital as inadequate. The neoconservative *National Post* ran a column titled "Throne speech lacked conviction," while the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of the country's financial elite, titled its editorial, "Not much here, but just wait until 2015"—the concluding phrase a reference to the Harper government's promise of further tax cuts.

The Conservatives success in implementing their right-wing agenda is entirely bound up with the suppression of working class opposition by the unions and the social-democratic NDP. They have responded to the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression by shifting still further right, imposing wage and job cuts and supporting government austerity. The NDP refused to even nominally support last year's Quebec student strike or oppose the draconian legislation the provincial Liberal government adopted against it; the unions isolated the striking students and politically harnessed the movement against the Liberals' austerity measures to the big business PQ. In Ontario, the NDP, with the full support of the unions, is sustaining in office a minority Liberal government that has imposed massive social spending cuts and used anti-worker legislation to cut teachers' real wages and impose other concessions.

In an attempt to convince Canada's ruling elite that the NDP can be trusted with the reins of power, it has declared "fiscal responsibility" its first principle, pledged not to raise personal tax rates even on the top one percent, enthusiastically supported Canada's leading role in the NATO war in Libya, and abetted the cover up of the state's spying on Canadians electronic communications and collaboration with the worldwide illegal activities of the US National Security Agency (NSA).



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