

Ontario Conservatives renew push for labor “reform”

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In the wake of last week’s Niagara Falls by-election victory by the trade union-backed Ontario New Democratic Party (NDP), Ontario Conservative leader Tim Hudak has doubled down on his party’s attack on workers’ basic rights.

In June 2012, Hudak—who continues to attempt to outflank provincial Liberal Premier Kathryn Wynne on the political right—issued a party white paper entitled “Paths to Prosperity: Flexible Labour Markets.” The white paper was the Conservative Party response to the governing Liberals’ imposition of a two-year wage freeze on 1 million Ontario public sector workers. The Liberals subsequently pushed through their wage freeze (and additional rollbacks in pension and other benefits for many public sector workers) by implementing strikebreaking legislation or threatening to do so.

Hudak’s platform calls for changes to labour laws patterned after the reactionary US “right-to-work” laws that for decades helped ensure that the US South was a cheap-labor zone. Under the misnamed laws now in effect in 24 US states, collective agreements requiring workers to pay union dues as a condition of their employment are outlawed. The basic aim of such legislation is to undermine the ability of workers to collectively fight in defense of their interests in opposition to the employers.

Hudak is proposing to erect new obstacles to winning union recognition and to abolish the Rand Formula, which provides for the “automatic check-off” of dues from all workers covered by a collective agreement irrespective of whether they belong to the union.

Hudak has lauded the former British Prime Minister and arch-reactionary Margaret Thatcher for her assault on the working class. “Modernizing our labour laws,” claims Hudak, “makes it more attractive for jobs. Thatcher was instructive in that. They had rigid labour

laws, they were deep in debt. She ended the closed shop, she modernized the labour laws”.

After his party’s defeat in the Niagara by-election Hudak denounced the NDP and its victorious candidate, Wayne Gates, the president of Local 199 of Unifor (the successor organization to the Canadian Auto Workers or CAW). Gates’ victory, asserted the Conservative leader “is all about the union elite who are running the show.” “Give me a level playing field in Niagara Falls and we win that seat,” complained Hudak. “It’s a (Conservative) seat. But when you give that oversized influence to big labour, they buy influence with members.”

The Niagara riding has been viewed as a bell-weather constituency. It had been held by the Liberals since 2003, before that by the Conservatives, and in the early 1990s by the NDP. In the run-up to the by-election, Hudak had, for a few weeks, soft-pedalled his call for “labour reform” because the Niagara Region has a significant population of industrial workers, many of them recently unemployed—Niagara has one of the highest rates of joblessness in the province. Prospective Tory candidates from several other blue-collar constituencies have also sought to convince the party to downplay its anti-worker agenda, at least till the elections are over.

But with the by-election behind him Hudak immediately stopped pulling his punches, declaiming against “union power” and announcing that his party has launched a website attacking the “Working Families” coalition. This union-sponsored group was formed after the unions shut down the mass movement that erupted against the rightwing Common Sense Revolution of Hudak’s Conservative predecessor and mentor, Mike Harris. Working Families has helped elect “anti-Conservative majorities”—i.e. big business

Liberal governments—in three successive elections and is preparing to mount a similar campaign against Hudak and his Conservatives in the election expected this spring, highlighting their “right-to-work” proposals.

The Ontario union bureaucracy is itself divided over electoral tactics. Sid Ryan, president of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and an ostensible “left” is arguing that the unions should only officially endorse the candidates of the social-democratic NDP. However, the supporters of Working Families, which includes the giant Ontario Public Service Union, several teachers’ and constructions unions, the UFCW, the Service Employees International Union, and the CAW (now merged in to Unifor), are once again plumping for “strategic voting” whereby union resources are directed towards Liberal politicians in ridings where they stand the best chance of defeating a Conservative.

These tactical differences dissipate, however, when it comes to opposing the Liberal austerity agenda, whether within the legislature or at the workplace. The unions—whatever their preferred electoral tactics—mounted no serious struggle against the Liberals’ public sector wage freeze, nor its cuts to health care and other public services. Indeed, with the OFL’s strong support, the NDP, led by Andrea Horwath, has twice ensured the passage of Liberal austerity budgets that cut public sector jobs and wages and slashed billions from public services.

The unions and the union-supported NDP have long pointed to the rightwing policy prescriptions of Hudak and his Conservatives to justify their close collaboration with the Liberals. The three-party charade in Ontario politics is, in reality, the mechanism by which big business pushes its agenda whilst pretending that voters actually have a substantive choice between the Liberals, Conservatives and NDP.

Prior to Michigan’s passage of “right-to-work” legislation in 2012, Canadian trade union leaders spoke out against it, saying they feared that it would provide a “competitive edge” for low-wage employers to draw jobs into Michigan, particularly from Ontario.

Of course, for well over a generation now, the unions have “dealt with” the competitive pressures of the global capitalist market by integrating themselves ever more closely into management and suppressing workers’ resistance. They have presided over the

imposition of concessions contracts that have gutted wages and benefits, imposed two-tier employment schemes, instituted backbreaking speedup, diluted pensions, and overseen the “orderly” shutdown of countless manufacturing facilities.

Utterly subservient to big business and the capitalist profit system, the well-paid bureaucrats who run the unions today oppose the threat of right-to-work legislation only because it threatens the flow of the dues that sustain their privileges.

The passage of right-to-work type laws in Wisconsin in 2011 and in Indiana and Michigan in 2012 has proceeded in lockstep with a widening attack on Canadian workers’ rights to organize and fight collectively.

In the past three years the federal Conservative government has on six separate occasions tabled back-to-work legislation, targeting workers at Air Canada, Canada Post and Canadian Pacific Railways. And only two weeks ago, the federal Tories used the threat of yet another back-to-work law to scuttle a planned strike by over 4,000 Canadian National Railway workers. In Ontario, the previous McGuinty Liberal government passed a law in 2012 that imposed concessions contracts on over 100,000 teachers and took away their right to strike for the next two years. In Alberta, the current Conservative government recently rammed two anti-worker laws through the legislature that criminalizes militant strike activity.

The labour bureaucracy’s response to all these attacks, including the growing push for “right-to-work” legislation, has not been to fight to mobilize the working class against the state attack on workers’ rights and the government-corporate drive to lower wages and slash public services. Rather the unions have appealed to the corporate bosses and their parliamentary mouthpieces to appreciate the role they play in suppressing the class struggle, policing the working class and ensuring corporate profitability.



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