

NDP's Olivia Chow challenges Rob Ford in Toronto mayoralty race

Carl Bronski
4 April 2014

Olivia Chow, a member of parliament for the New Democratic Party (NDP) and widow of Jack Layton, the late leader of the NDP and Canada's Official Opposition, has resigned her federal seat—and position as a shadow cabinet minister for current leader Thomas Mulcair—in order to run against Rob Ford in the October 2014 election for mayor of Toronto.

In the opening stages of the lengthy eight-month campaign, Chow has signaled that the centerpiece of her election strategy will be to “out Ford” the scandal-plagued, multi-millionaire, right-wing mayor on questions of fiscal austerity and taxes. Espousing the bromides of the sitting mayor, Chow has promised to stick up for “the little guy” by “living within our means” and “keeping a tight grip on the public purse.” She has promised to help entrepreneurs by cutting their taxes, bragged about working amicably during her days as a Toronto city councilor with former right-wing mayor Mel Lastman, and presented herself to big business as firmly opposed to “tax and spend” policies.

Ford has promoted the same snake-oil over the past three-and-a-half years, resulting in the continued deterioration of municipal infrastructure, grossly overcrowded public transit, road gridlock, ongoing reductions in social services and unrelenting attacks on the jobs, wages and benefits of city workers.

Today, almost a quarter of Toronto's nearly 3 million residents live below the poverty line. Despite Ford's claim that the city is “booming,” unemployment reached a whopping 10.1 percent this winter and has only declined slightly with the onset of the construction season.

At the same time, the city—Canada's banking centre and home to the head offices of many of the country's top corporations—has the highest income inequality quotient for any Canadian municipality. Only the petro-dollar fuelled city of Calgary is home to a higher concentration of “one-per centers”—that is, the super-rich occupying the very top income percentile.

Chow has called for the dismantling of the “circus tent” that has characterized Toronto politics under the current

disgraced mayor. For his part, Ford, grotesquely billing himself as the best mayor the city has ever had, hopes that he can use the upcoming months to push to the background the ongoing and sordid spectacle of drug and alcohol abuse, criminal associations, habitual lying and outright buffoonery that resulted in his being stripped of much of his executive authority by the city council last year and his antics being splattered across the television screens and front-pages of the world's media outlets.

Like Chow, the other leading mayoral candidates are vowing they will impose an austerity agenda but without the drama and controversy that has surrounded Ford. John Tory, a former CEO of the giant Rogers Telecommunications empire and perennially failed Conservative candidate, and right-wing councilor Karen Stintz, unable to differentiate themselves from Chow on the issue of “fiscal prudence,” have joined with Ford to promote the building of a suburban subway line in Scarborough and a central city relief line; whilst Chow is plumping for a Light Rail plan for Scarborough and attacking her opponents for failing to cost the downtown relief line.

Early polls have shown that Chow would defeat all candidates by a plurality of votes. A survey released shortly after she declared her candidacy gave her 36 percent voter support. Incumbent Ford placed second with 28 percent with Tory at 22 percent and Stintz at 5 percent.

The NDP has placed a high premium on Chow's mayoralty bid. Nathan Rotman, the federal party's National Director, resigned his position to take a senior position on Chow's “non-partisan” campaign team. In order to entice a section of the Liberal Party into her camp, Warren Kinsella, longtime operative in former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien's election campaigns, has been appointed chief of Chow's “war room.” Former provincial Liberal cabinet minister and former mayoral candidate George Smitherman has also endorsed Chow. Indeed, so right-wing is Chow's platform that no less a figure than John Lassinger, who has run campaigns for provincial and federal Conservatives for decades, has signed on as her campaign manager. In just a

few days following her announcement to stand for mayor, Chow raised almost \$400,000 from Liberal and NDP supporters—one third of the total allowable amount for a mayoral bid.

While Chow is promoting herself as the “responsible,” “progressive” alternative to Ford, it was the policies of former NDP mayor David Miller that opened the door for Ford’s election in 2010. Miller presided over a dramatic infusion of wealth to the city’s financial elite through a series of generous property tax breaks, grants, subsidies and grossly undervalued business land assessments, while raising taxes and user fees for working people. In 2009, he forced a concessions-laden contract on 30,000 striking city workers. None of the city’s nominally progressive councilors raised a voice to defend the workers, whom the press vilified as “selfish” for fighting to safeguard their modest salaries and benefits. Only months before the election, Miller and his left-leaning council further alienated whole swathes of the local population when they voted unanimously to wholeheartedly commend the police for their brutal, four-day assault on thousands of demonstrators and by-standers during the G-20 summit in the city.

Campaigning in the 2010 election, Ford harnessed widespread popular anger against declining living standards by promising to lower taxes, while shamelessly lying that any cuts would only affect the “gravy train” on which city employees reputedly gorged. He was elected by only a quarter of total eligible voters.

When significant opposition to Ford’s right-wing agenda emerged in the fall of 2011, the unions and NDP worked to suppress it, limiting it to impotent protests, then imposed unprecedented concession contracts on city workers. For all their declamations against Ford, the unions and NDP agree that working people must pay for the capitalist crisis through wage and public service cuts. With the unions’ full support, the NDP has propped up a minority Ontario Liberal government that has imposed social spending cuts even larger than those imposed by the Thatcherite Ontario Conservative government of Mike Harris in the late 1990s.

The big business friendly, neo-liberal perspective espoused by Chow has been part and parcel of a decades’-long dash to the right by social democracy in Canada. She backed her late husband, Jack Layton, in spearheading the transformation of the federal NDP from an impotent party of parliamentary protest into a “progressive” party of government consciously-modeled after Obama’s Democrats—a party that, if called on to assume government responsibilities in Ottawa, would not hesitate to impose the full weight of the capitalist crisis on the backs of the Canadian working class.

Having taken over as NDP leader in 2003, Layton eagerly pursued an alliance with the big business Liberals, the

Canadian elite’s preferred part of government during the twentieth century. In 2005, the NDP propped up a minority Liberal government led by Paul Martin, who as Finance Minister in the Chretien Liberal government of the mid 1990s had presided over the deepest social spending cuts in Canadian history, then lavished \$100 billion in tax cuts on big business and the rich.

Three-and-a-half years later, in December 2008, Layton signed a formal agreement to enter into a Liberal-led coalition government, agreeing to drop the NDP’s bogus calls for a withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan and to implement the Liberal-Conservative plan to reduce corporate taxes by more than \$50 billion over five years. In its first major vote as the Official Opposition, the NDP voted to extend Canada’s participation in the war against Libya that was initiated by former colonial powers France and Britain with the backing of Washington. Endorsing the lie that the Libyan war was about protecting civilians, the NDP emerged once again as a political accomplice in an imperialist war of aggression. More recently, current party leader Thomas Mulcair has strongly supported Prime Minister Harper’s support for the US-instigated, fascist-led coup in Ukraine and declared that the NDP is open to a possible post-election coalition with the Liberals.

The NDP has never been a party that upholds the independent interests of the working class. Rather it has served as the political voice of privileged layers of the middle class, above all, the trade union bureaucracy, and served to buttress capitalist rule by smothering any mass movement of the working class. Like social-democratic parties the world over, the NDP has shifted far to the right over the past quarter century, shredding even its traditional milquetoast reformist program and unabashedly imposed austerity when in office in various provincial capitals. With Olivia Chow’s campaign announcements, working people in the city of Toronto can expect more of the same.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact