Ontario: Liberals regain majority with union support

Keith Jones
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Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and her big-business Liberal Party won back their parliamentary majority in Thursday's provincial election by appealing to popular opposition to the "slash and burn" agenda of the Progressive Conservatives.

With 38.7 percent of votes cast, the Liberals captured 59 of the Ontario legislature's 107 seats. The Progressive Conservatives—the Ontario sister party of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservatives—took 27 seats, 10 less than in the October 2011 election.

Led by Tim Hudak, Ontario's Conservatives ran on a hard-right program. This included pledges to cut 100,000 public sector jobs, eliminate one-third of all governmental regulations, and make Ontario's corporate tax rate the lowest in all North America.

The Liberals have themselves implemented massive social spending cuts and lavished tax cuts on big business. Moreover, behind the scenes they have elaborated plans to dramatically downsize public services. But drawing from the playbook of former Prime Minister Jean Chretien, who instituted the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, while railing against the rightwing Reform and Canadian Alliance parties, the Liberals used Hudak as a rightwing foil. Voting Liberal, implored Wynne, her corporate backers, the trade unions, and numerous "progressive" activists, was the only means of blocking Hudak's road to power and preserving a "caring" Ontario.

The social-democratic New Democratic Party, meanwhile, ran arguably its most rightwing campaign ever. Unable and unwilling to differentiate itself from the anti-working class austerity records of the two larger parties, it focused its campaign on denunciations of Liberal "corruption" and government "waste." Earlier this spring, Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath held private meetings with representatives of the Bay Street banks and investment houses and leading manufacturers. According to the *Globe and Mail*, Horwath used these meetings to assure big business of her readiness to do "whatever it takes to bring the province's books back to balance in four years—including cutting government spending and playing tough with public sector unions."

The corporate media conceded that Ontarians had little enthusiasm for any of the parties or their leaders and that many who voted did so more to prevent the victory of a party they opposed than out of positive support for the party for which they voted.

At 52.1 percent, voter turnout in Thursday's election was up only slightly from the record low of 49.2 set in 2011.

The Liberals won 6 more seats than in 2011, when their then nine-year-old government was reduced to a minority. But their share of the popular vote rose by just 1.1 percentage points. Conservative support, however, fell by more than five percentage points to 31.2 percent, one of their worst ever results. Like the Liberals, the NDP garnered just a 1 percentage point increase in its popular vote, rising from 22.65 to 23.7 percent, but this proved sufficient to win 21 seats, four more than in 2011.

Having regained their parliamentary majority by cynically posturing as defenders of public services, Wynne and her Liberals will now implement massive social spending cuts and launch a drive, long-discussed in the corridors of government, to privatize and contract out public services and their administration.

The budget the Liberals tabled in May and which was hailed by the unions as the most "progressive" budget in decades stipulates that for three years beginning in 2015 there will be no increase whatsoever in

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government program spending. Due to inflation and population growth, this nominal spending freeze will translate into real, across-the-board, spending cuts of well over three percent per year or more than 10 percent by 2018.

Moreover, this comes after years of Liberal austerity measures. Declaring the recession over, the Liberals in 2010 announced a multi-year program of tax cuts for big business, while initiating, in the name of deficit reduction, an austerity drive.

In 2012 this drive was dramatically expanded with the tabling of a budget that made cuts that dwarfed even those carried out by Mike Harris and his Conservatives during their Commonsense Revolution of the 1990s. This included the imposition of a two-year wage freeze on a million public sector workers, including teachers, nurses, hospital workers and civil servants.

With the full support of the unions, the New Democrats ensured that the Liberals had the votes to pass their 2012 budget and did so again in 2013, after the Liberals had illegalized all job action by public school teachers and imposed concessionary contracts on them that cut their real wages, pensions and sick benefits.

Fearing that their support for the Liberals—at one point Horwath had toyed with the idea of proposing a formal NDP-Liberal coalition—would damage their party's electoral prospects, the NDP leadership announced at the beginning of last month that it was withdrawing its support for Wynne's government.

This decision was angrily denounced by most of the union leadership, including Ontario Federation of Labour President Sid Ryan and Jerry Dias, the head of Unifor, the country's largest industrial union.

After shutting down the mass anti-Harris protests that rocked Ontario from 1995 through 1997, for fear that they might break free of their control, the unions moved sharply to the right, with a large section of the bureaucracy calling for "strategic voting" to defeat the Conservatives, i.e. the election of a Liberal government .

The unions were pivotal to the Liberals' election in 2003 on a program that left in place all the key tenets of the Common Sense Revolution—including huge tax cuts for the wealthy and the slashing of welfare and other social services. And they have helped sustain the Liberals in office ever since.

The difference in the most recent election campaign is that many unions refused to support the NDP even in ridings where they are "electorally competitive," so as to punish the social democrats for not continuing their de facto parliamentary alliance with Wynne and her Liberals.

The reality is that the ruling class has three parties—all of them committed to making working people pay for the capitalist crisis. The competition between them is used to better refine the class strategy of big business and to diffuse popular opposition and divert it into politically harmless channels.

The unions are similarly instruments for containing and suppressing the class struggle. Time and again, they have used the threat of an ultra-rightwing Conservative government to intimidate the working class and justify their collaboration with the Liberals in imposing austerity, including slashing public services and the jobs and wages of the workers they represent.

Workers and young people must beware. The Wynne Liberal government with the complicity of the unions and NDP and as part of a social counterrevolution being pursued by big business and governments of every political stripe across Canada will use its parliamentary majority to ram through massive social spending cuts and the wholesale privatization of public services and infrastructure. This agenda will provoke mass opposition. But if such opposition is to be politically sustained it must be led by new organizations of struggle, independent of the reactionary union apparatuses, and become an independent political movement of the working class armed with a socialist program for workers' governments in Ottawa and across Canada.

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