

Toronto's mayoralty candidates ignore growing poverty

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Even as the leading candidates for Toronto's October 27 mayoralty election jockey to present the most "business friendly" platform, a series of reports have been released that show whole swathes of the city's population are living in dire straits.

At most, these reports have caused Conservative front-runner John Tory and New Democratic Party (NDP) contender Olivia Chow to issue perfunctory, pro forma statements of "concern." As for incumbent Mayor Rob Ford, he simply disputes the naked facts, insisting that Toronto has "boomed" due to his tenure as Toronto's chief magistrate.

An August report compiled by the Social Planning Council and various community groups concluded that child poverty in Toronto has reached "epidemic" levels. One hundred and forty-nine thousand children—or 29 percent of all minors living in the Canada's largest municipality—survive in low-income families (defined as those earning less than \$38,000 for a family of four or roughly what two adults would earn if they were both working full-time at the provincial minimum wage).

Poverty, moreover, is heading upwards, with predictions that one-third of all children could soon be victims of pervasive and chronic poverty. Including both adults and children, 610,000 people are characterized as low-income in a city of 2,600,000.

The poverty statistics also speak to the growing social polarization in the city. Forty percent of all neighbourhoods experience child poverty rates above 30 percent. Several areas with a high concentration of public housing—Moss Park, Regent Park and Thorncliffe Park—have child poverty rates in excess of 50 percent.

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 petrodollar 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.

Other statistics further illustrate the plight of hundreds of thousands of the city's residents. There are over a million separate visits to food banks per year in Toronto. Food bank use has spread from traditional inner city areas to the suburbs, where usage has increased by 20 percent since 2008.

It has been determined that the average food bank client in Toronto spends over 75 percent of their monthly income just on rent, leaving them with less than \$6 per day for all other expenses.

The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Toronto is \$1,200 per month. A place for an infant in a licensed day-care facility also runs about \$1,200 per month. There are currently 70,000 households on a waiting list for community housing. Wait times average close to seven years. Nineteen-thousand children are on waiting lists for subsidized day-care. Over the past year, Toronto city council has "responded" to the day-care and housing crises by selling off public housing stock and adding a paltry 528 subsidized day-care spaces.

Despite Rob Ford's claim that the city is "booming", Toronto's unemployment rate stands at 9.1 percent—the highest rate of any major city in Canada. Youth unemployment is double that figure. Further, of some 310,000 jobless workers in the city, only a miniscule 17 percent are collecting unemployment insurance due to draconian restrictions to the program imposed by the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and its Liberal predecessors.

At a recent debate called by a local anti-poverty

group, mayoral candidate John Tory acknowledged that the child poverty report was “troubling.” Olivia Chow agreed, stating the figures were “heart-breaking.” Ford declined to attend the event. Both Chow and Tory signed a worthless pledge to “vote for and implement an anti-poverty strategy in 2015 with clear targets” before returning to their preferred themes of balanced budgets” and “responsible spending”—i.e. continuing municipal budget cuts.

Chow, a former NDP Member of Parliament and widow of Jack Layton, the late leader of the NDP, resigned her federal seat last March in order to run against Rob Ford. Chow has insisted on the “non-partisan” nature of her campaign and has gathered around her prominent Liberals and Conservatives to augment NDP staffers on her election team.

To date, the centerpiece of her election strategy has been 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 and cutting regulatory oversight of business licensing, 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.

Chow’s right-wing platform has not prevented pseudo-left groups from calling on workers to cast a vote for her. Typical is the statement from the International Socialists who gushingly wrote, “The entry of prominent NDP member Olivia Chow has given hope that a better Toronto is possible. She is a lifelong lefty who has supported countless struggles. People see her as the candidate of the 99 percent...”

Chow’s candidacy may have energized the layers of middle-class radicals that orbit around the NDP and the trade union bureaucracy and promote various forms of reactionary identity policies. However, her big business policy prescriptions have rightly earned her disdain and indifference from working people.

Recent polls place Chow in third place, far behind John Tory, a former CEO of the giant Rogers Telecommunications empire and previous leader of the Ontario Conservatives. She is even trailing the

discredited buffoon and bigot Mayor Ford. With support for ever-rightward moving NDP candidates dwindling in Toronto—the party lost 3 seats there in the recent Ontario election—Chow last week attempted to add a populist fig leaf to her platform by promising to increase the Land Transfer Tax by one percent for people selling homes worth two million dollars or more.

Like Chow, Tory is vowing to impose an austerity agenda but without the drama and controversy that has surrounded Ford. With big business in Toronto concerned about the impact of gridlock and inadequate rapid transit cutting into labour flexibility, transport costs and corporate productivity, and with the candidates largely in agreement on budgetary issues, competing rapid transit plans have dominated the official election debate. Growing joblessness, poverty and social inequality have merited barely a mention from the corporate media and from Chow, Tory and Ford—rival representatives of big business.



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