

Canada: Alberta's "united right" elects key Harper aide to lead new party

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Jason Kenney, a former top minister in Stephen Harper's federal Conservative government, has emerged at the head of a new formation in Alberta which unites traditional conservatives and far-right forces drawn from the religious and libertarian right. The United Conservative Party (UCP) represents a further shift to the right in Alberta politics and is a sign of mounting regional tensions within the Canadian bourgeoisie.

The UCP emerged out of the fusion of the Progressive Conservatives (PC), which until 2015 had ruled the province uninterrupted for four decades, and the ultra-rightwing Wildrose Party. Wildrose was established in 2008, bringing together former Reform Party elements, social conservatives, and disgruntled PC members.

Under conditions of the global economic crisis, Wildrose campaigned for even harsher austerity measures than those adopted by the PCs, including deep cuts to government spending and even lower corporate and income taxes for the wealthy to enhance the so-called "Alberta advantage."

Wildrose also expressed the regionalist current within sections of big business in Western Canada. It denounced "equalization," the system under which the federal government transfers money to provinces with lower per capita incomes so as to ensure basic equivalence in health care and other public services across the country. In practice, Alberta, due to its vibrant oil and natural gas sector, has long been a net contributor to equalization, while Quebec, the Atlantic provinces and in recent years Ontario have benefited from the federal transfers.

Kenney beat former Wildrose leader Brian Jean in the UCP leadership race. But on all essential points, they were equally right-wing.

All the candidates running for the UCP leadership made it perfectly clear that, in the name of reviving Alberta's economy, which since 2014 has been battered by the collapse in world oil prices, they would further slash taxes for big business and gore social spending, including by cutting health and education jobs.

Kenney has promised to implement a 20 percent cross-the-board cut in public spending, and has said that a UCP government would freeze or partially roll back the provincial minimum wage which is slated to rise to \$15 per hour by October 2018. Jean likewise called for massive social spending

cuts and a minimum wage freeze, while third-place finisher, Calgary lawyer Doug Schweitzer, advocated rolling the minimum wage back to \$12.20 per hour. Out of Alberta's working-age population of 2.9 million, currently 300,000 people, or more than 10 percent, earn less than \$15 an hour.

Kenney has made no secret of his intention to whip up "Alberta First" regionalism and to make Anglo-chauvinist, anti-Quebec appeals, akin to those of the former Reform Party, as part of a crusade to advance Western Canadian corporate interests, especially Big Oil. He has denounced the current equalization formula as unfair to Alberta; pledged to defy the federal government's carbon tax program and to otherwise "stand up" to Justin Trudeau; and said a UCP government will take aggressive measures to force the building of pipelines to bring Alberta oil to tidewater, including possibly withholding energy shipments to British Columbia.

Kenney's stance is reminiscent of that of the Peter Lougheed-led Progressive Conservative government, which in the early 1980s fought against Justin Trudeau's father, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, and his Liberal government's National Energy Program to secure the world-oil price for Alberta's oil barons and exclusive provincial control over oil royalties. The one key difference is that today economic conditions are even more unstable, within Canada and around the world, meaning that the frictions between the various regional factions of Canada's ruling elite are even more explosive.

The emergence of new right-wing parties and political figures—driven by the deepening global capitalist crisis, and exploiting popular anger with both the traditional conservative parties and the pro-war, pro-austerity establishment "left"—is an international phenomenon. It finds its most prominent expression in Donald Trump's ascendancy to the US presidency, but also in the strengthening of neo-fascist parties in Europe like France's Front National and the Alternative for Germany.

Kenney's own political record and trajectory make him an ideal candidate to lead such a right-wing formation. A social conservative, he opposes abortion rights and makes targeted appeals to anti-gay bigotry. He was a pillar of Harper's decade-long government, which slashed public spending and pursued an aggressive militarist foreign policy. He was Harper's

parliamentary secretary, then from 2008 to 2013 Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. He used the latter post to clamp down on refugee rights and stir up Islamophobia. He also had a brief spell in 2015 as Defence Minister, which saw him advocate a hardline approach to Russia over Ukraine and a ruthless waging of the Mideast war in Iraq and Syria in the name of combatting “terrorism.”

Notwithstanding the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) government’s total subservience to big business, the dominant sections of the ruling elite in Alberta, including Big Oil and agribusiness interests, are determined to bring a UCP government to power in 2019. The merger of the PCs and Wildrose, a process often interrupted by internal bickering, was encouraged by pressure from big business for the right to “get its act together” and overwhelmingly favourable media coverage.

That such a reactionary, anti-working class party is now the prohibitive favourite to come to power at the next Alberta election is entirely due to the NDP’s rotten right-wing record. The hundreds of thousands of workers and youth who took the NDP at its word when it promised in 2015 to provide a genuine alternative to decades of conservative rule have been sorely disappointed.

Prior to the last election, NDP leader Rachel Notley vowed to conduct a review on the royalty rates of the big oil companies, increase taxes on the wealthy, create new jobs for the working class and curb the environmentally destructive exploitation of the Alberta tar sands.

As soon as the NDP took power, Notley abandoned any talk of opposition to pipelines and established a panel stuffed with oil industry executives on royalties which decided to leave them untouched. Conservative columnist Don Braid once aptly observed, “Premier Rachel Notley didn’t just extend an olive branch to oil and gas leaders ... she brought the whole tree and shook it, raining down petals of praise and friendship.”

Successive NDP budgets slashed spending on critical public and social services, even as the province’s economy was reeling from the oil price collapse and tens of thousands of workers found themselves unemployed.

On November 28, NDP Finance Minister Joe Ceci delivered a budget update in which he demanded that the unions representing provincial civil servants, teachers, hospital and other public sector workers accept a pay freeze and a job-cutting hiring freeze until September 2019.

The emergence of Kenney at the head of the UCP has only encouraged the NDP to move even further to the right so as to demonstrate its loyalty to the corporate elite. In a speech given to the Calgary Chamber of Commerce on November 24, Notley opened with the remark, allegedly delivered in jest, “I spent the earlier part of the week out in Ontario. You know, the home of those eastern bastards.” She went on to pledge to do all she could to ensure the energy sector can get its products to market, a message which won her a standing ovation.

Even the former interim leader of the United Conservative Party Ric McIver, noted that Notley “sounded a lot ... like Jason Kenney or like a UCP member” and “she actually talked about the overreach of the National Energy Board, something she has taken from Jason Kenney and the United Conservative Party’s playbook.”

Under these conditions, the maintenance of the NDP’s authority depends increasingly on the duplicitous role being played by pseudo-left groups like Fightback, which despite its professions to be a “Marxist” tendency functions as a loyal NDP faction. The Fightback editorial board issued a statement shortly after Kenney’s election to the UCP leadership which laughably declared that the NDP, a right-wing pro-capitalist party is “organically tied to the working class”!

“Grassroots mobilization of the Alberta NDP rank-and-file, the trade unions and community organizations of the working class should be initiated immediately,” proclaimed Fightback. “Rank-and-file members of the Alberta NDP should not just be mobilized during the election for phone rounds and door knocking, as is often the case, but involved in organizing meetings and forums to oppose the right wing ... Workers and youth need to be mobilized now, and called on to organize around bold socialist policies and the need to break decisively with capitalism.”

There is more chance of a frost-free winter in Alberta than there is of the NDP ever leading a working-class challenge to austerity, let alone fighting for socialist policies. Fightback’s function is to employ radical-sounding rhetoric to prevent what it, together with its NDP allies, most fears: the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class. It is only through the construction of such a movement, in irreconcilable struggle against the NDP and all of its “left” hangers-on, that the rise of Kenney and the far right more broadly can be defeated.



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