Ontario Conservatives select right-wing populist Doug Ford as leader

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In a sharp shift further right, Ontario's Progressive Conservatives chose Doug Ford as their new leader last weekend.

A multi-millionaire businessman and the elder brother of former right-wing populist Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, the new Conservative leader aims to intensify the assault on the working class. He has pledged that if he becomes premier of Canada's most populous province following Ontario's June 7 election, he will slash social spending, environmental and labour standards, and taxes on big business and the rich.

The leadership race was triggered by the unceremonious dumping of former leader Patrick Brown, who was thrown to the wolves by the party's legislators and senior staff within hours of CTV airing unsubstantiated claims of sexual misconduct. Some of these claims have since been disproven. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, if Brown could so rapidly be drummed out of the leadership, it was because powerful forces within the party establishment and big business were opposed to his attempt to moderate the party's hard-right image in hopes of returning to power after a decade and a half in the political wilderness.

"Nothing progressive can come out of the removal of Brown," we wrote at the time. "It advances the struggle to develop an independent political movement of the working class against austerity and war not one iota. On the contrary, the anti-democratic and right-wing character of the #MeToo witch hunt, together with the media hysteria being whipped up around Brown, will be used to push the political climate in Ontario and across Canada further right."

The development and outcome of the Progressive Conservative (PC) leadership race have entirely vindicated this assessment. The three other contenders—Caroline Mulroney, the daughter of former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney; former Ontario legislator Christine Elliott; and social conservative activist Tanya Granic-Allen—joined Ford in repudiating much of Brown's electoral platform, the so-called "People's Guarantee."

Ford's victory is part of a general lurch to the right in official bourgeois politics internationally, exemplified in Donald Trump's elevation to the White House and the rise to prominence of the neo-fascist National Front in France and AfD in Germany. Last November, Jason Kenney, a former minister in Stephen Harper's federal Conservative cabinet, won the leadership of Alberta's newly-created United Conservative Party, a fusion between the province's PCs and the far-right Wildrose Party, with open appeals to anti-Quebec chauvinism and pledges to roll back the minimum wage and slash public sector jobs. Like Ford, he is adamantly opposed to the federal Liberal government's carbon tax.

Though the Tory establishment and substantial sections of the Bay Street financial elite welcomed Brown's departure as a means of shifting the party further right, Ford was far from their candidate of choice. This is because they fear that like his late brother, whose legacy he claims to uphold, he could prove to be a liability due to erratic behaviour and his readiness to make divisive and provocative populist appeals.

As Toronto mayor, Rob Ford pushed through devastating budget cuts and imposed major contract concessions, including the gutting of job security guarantees, on city workers in 2012, when the Canadian Union of Public Employees shamelessly surrendered before his threat to hire scabs in the event of a strike. But the ruling elite ostracized Rob Ford in 2013 after news became public of his crack cocaine habit, alcohol addiction, and sleazy backroom business dealings. The following year, they swung behind a mayoral candidate who was more polished, but no less devoted to enforcing the dictates of big business, former Ontario Conservative leader John Tory.

Elliott was the preferred candidate of the party establishment, closely followed by Mulroney who attracted hefty donations from Bay Street.

However, since Ford's narrow victory over Elliott, the corporate media has gone out of its way to dismiss claims that he is a "Canadian Trump" and to proclaim him a strong candidate for premier. Andrew Coyne opined in the neoconservative *National Post* that Ford is "not his brother,

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he's not Trump," while Susan Delacourt, who enjoys close ties to the Liberal Party, reassured her readers at *iPolitics*, "Ford is no Trump, he's a lot more like Harper."

If the corporate media, or at least much of it, is quickly reconciling itself to a Ford-led government, it is because there is growing concern within the ruling class that the federal and Ontario Liberal governments are not moving aggressively enough, in the face of the development of trade war and intensifying great-power conflict, to bolster the "competitive" position of Canadian capital and to pursue rearmament.

Coyne and Delacourt notwithstanding, comparisons between Ford and Trump are not gratuitous. Ford casts himself as an opponent of the "elite" while denouncing "big government" and a reputed "gravy train" of spending and vowing to make Ontario "open for business" by slashing corporate taxes and government regulation. During a question-and-answer session with reporters shortly before the conclusion of the leadership race, Ford enthused over Trump's massive business tax cut, claiming that it was bringing manufacturing jobs back to the US.

Delacourt's linking of Ford to Harper also bears comment. During his decade as Canadian Prime Minister (2006-15), Harper celebrated Canada as a "warrior nation," imposed brutal austerity measures, and whipped up Islamophobia and a climate of fear to justify Canada participation's in a series of US-led military wars and a massive expansion of the powers of the national security apparatus. That such a reactionary record is being held up as evidence of Ford's moderation only underscores how far establishment politics have shifted right.

Ford made a deliberate appeal during the campaign to the religious right. As premier, he said he would introduce a requirement for parents to approve teenage abortions, a move that won him plaudits from the anti-abortion Canadian Life Coalition. He also vowed to scrap Ontario's new sex education curriculum, which has become a hobby horse for social conservatives due, among other things, to its discussion of homosexual sex.

Ford was publicly blessed and endorsed by evangelical preacher Paul Melnichuk, a controversial figure who was accused of anti-Semitism in the early 1980s for a sermon which denounced "the crooked Jew."

In the end, it was Ford's appeal to such social conservative elements that secured him the leadership. Ford finished second to Elliott on the first ballot and won fewer individual votes on the final ballot. But he was propelled to victory because he was the second choice of an estimated 80 percent of supporters of fourth-place finisher, Tanya Granic-Allen—a Christian fundamentalist and head of the socially conservative Parents as First Educators campaign group.

The fact that a reactionary anti-working-class figure such as Ford is able to posture as an opponent of the "elites," while decrying overcrowded hospitals and the social devastation caused by the hemorrhaging of manufacturing jobs, is due above all to the right-wing record of the Liberals and NDP, and their supporters in the pro-capitalist trade unions.

Ford will face off June 7 against Kathleen Wynne, whose Liberals have been in power for the past 16 years. With the backing of the trade unions, which have poured millions of dollars into Liberal election campaigns, Wynne and her predecessor Dalton McGuinty have enforced ruthless austerity measures, privatized public utilities, illegalized teacher strikes, and extended billions in tax handouts to the corporate elite.

From 2012 to 2014, Wynne's minority government was kept in office by the NDP, which provided the parliamentary votes necessary to pass two austerity budgets in the name of "stopping" the Conservatives. When the New Democrats last held power in the early 1990s under Bob Rae, they came into headlong conflict with the working class, imposing a job and wage-cutting "social contract," sweeping social spending cuts, and workfare.

During the Liberals' period in office, their trade union allies have connived in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs, devastating the province's southwest in particular. Unifor, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Liberals, has imposed round after round of concessions on autoworkers.

It is already clear that Wynne, backed by her trade union allies and egged on by their pseudo-left appendages, will seize on Ford's candidacy to step up appeals for uniting the "progressive" vote behind the big-business Liberals.

Speaking at an Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) conference Sunday, Wynne hypocritically cast herself as the representative of working people against the "big business" candidate Ford, claiming the election presents Ontarians with a "stark choice."

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