

Ontario: Pro-austerity Liberals tout pre-election, “caring” budget

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5 April 2018

The budget Kathleen Wynne’s Ontario Liberal government tabled last week was a desperate attempt to patch up its tattered “progressive” credentials ahead of the June 7 provincial election.

The Liberals framed their spending plan as proof of a purported radical difference between their “caring,” “pro-people” approach to politics and that of the “pro-big business” Progressive Conservatives. What gall. In Ontario’s government for the past 15 years, the Liberals, first under Dalton McGuinty and now Wynne, have slashed social spending while cutting taxes for big business and the rich, privatized public utilities; cut the real wages of public sector workers; and repeatedly illegalized strikes.

The budget was so transparent an election ploy that all sections of the corporate media, from the pro-Liberal *Toronto Star* and the state-controlled CBC through to the neo-conservative *National Post*, described it as more of an election platform than a budget and with just as much credibility.

Only last November, Finance Minister Charles Souza was boasting that the Liberals had made the “hard choices” needed to balance the budget and pledging that the Wynne government would deliver balanced budgets well into the 2020s.

But with the polls showing that the Liberals are threatened with an electoral rout, they suddenly discovered that there are pressing “social deficits” that require the province run up a projected C\$6.7 billion budget.

Sousa promised the province will provide free child care for children aged two-and-a-half to four starting in 2020; extend a program providing free prescription drugs to lower-income seniors and to all those over 65; invest C\$2.1 billion over the next four years in mental health care; increase Ontario’s miserly welfare payments by 3 percent per annum for the next three years; and provide a modest stipend (up to C\$700 for a family of four) to low-income families to help defray dental and other medical costs not covered by Medicare or workplace insurance.

Beginning in 2012, Wynne’s government enforced a four-

year health-spending freeze that has greatly exacerbated emergency-room overcrowding and lengthy wait-times for even life-saving procedures, while further increasing the already heavy workloads of nurses and other health care workers.

Yet last week, the premier cynically presented her government as rushing to the support of patients and the health care system’s beleaguered workers. “This investment is going to mean people will get faster care in all of our hospitals around the province,” gushed Wynne.

Even in the unlikely event all the Liberals’ promises of additional spending are fulfilled, they will not begin to address the crisis in the province’s chronically underfunded and understaffed health care system.

Moreover, the budget makes clear that notwithstanding the Liberals’ electorally driven hype about “social investments” and deficit-spending, they will maintain ultra-low taxes for business and the rich and quickly pivot back to yet more austerity.

The budget commits the Liberals to launching a new drive to eliminate the provincial budget in 2020-2021. In other words, after two years of extremely modest social spending increases, a re-elected Liberal government would quickly shift back to cost-cutting, wage freezes, and “efficiency” savings.

Even so, the corporate elite has, by and large, reacted with anger and frustration to the Liberals’ plan for social spending increases and a modest deficit, viewing it as an unwelcome pause in the assault on the working class. Significantly, the pro-Liberal *Toronto Star* joined the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* in castigating the budget. “Many voters,” declared the *Star* editorial board, “will be rightly skeptical of so many expensive across-the-board pledges. ... The Liberals are leaving themselves wide open to [Progressive Conservative leader] Doug Ford’s taunt that they’re just trying to buy votes. ...”

The Ontario Liberal budget appears to have given added impetus to the push, also visible at the federal level, from the ruling elite for a further lurch of politics to the right so as to

strengthen the “competitive” and geo-strategic position of Canadian capital.

Until only a few months ago, Doug Ford was widely derided by the press as a radical right-wing populist, irreversibly tainted by his role as the chief political ally of his troubled brother, the late Toronto Mayor Rob Ford. Now, he has been embraced by large sections of the media as a credible candidate for Ontario premier. Indeed, press commentators have gone to great lengths to assure their readers that, notwithstanding many parallels, Ford is no Trump.

Wynne and her Liberals are rightly despised among broad sections of working people who have seen how this big business party employs “left” and “progressive” rhetoric to get elected, only to mount vicious attacks on workers’ social rights.

The trade unions and New Democratic Party (NDP) bear political responsibility for the Liberals’ ability to perpetuate this fraud. Following the last upsurge of the working class in Ontario against the Mike Harris Progressive Conservative government’s “Common Sense Revolution” of the 1990s, the unions formed a close partnership with the Liberals to smother the class struggle and accelerate the unions’ integration into corporatist co-management and tripartite—employer, union, government—structures.

Over the past 15 years, the unions, led by Unifor, the teachers’ unions, and the Ontario Federation of Labour, have poured millions of dollars into Liberal election campaigns through the Ontario Working Families Coalition. In the name of voting “strategically” to “stop” the Tories, the unions have helped secure the election of right-wing Liberal governments that have implemented the ruling class agenda—including maintaining the basic tenets of the Common Sense Revolution and imposing corporate tax cuts far beyond those envisaged by Mike Harris.

The unions are no less determined to secure the Liberals’ re-election this time around.

Unifor applauded the bogus promises contained in Wynne’s pre-election budget, claiming they “show continued momentum towards social justice.” Unifor President Jerry Dias asserted, “This budget sets the baseline for the upcoming election. Ontarians need strong public services and investments to address inequality, not the right-wing, backward budget cuts that the Conservatives are threatening.”

Who does Dias think he is kidding? His claim that the Liberals can secure “strong public services” is made of a party that has slashed spending on health care, education, and social provisions to the bone, outlawed strikes and job actions by teachers and other sections of workers, and connived with Unifor to impose sweeping concessions on

autoworkers, including wage and benefit cuts of more than C\$20 per hour as part of the 2009 industry “bailout.”

The Ontario Liberals, it should be added, are the closest allies of Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government. The latter, which is also strongly supported by the unions, has announced plans to increase military spending by over 70 percent in the coming decade, slashed health spending by reducing transfers to the provinces, and opened up Canada’s public infrastructure to wholesale privatization.

The NDP is equally complicit in boosting the Liberals as a “progressive” alternative. Canada’s social democrats responded to the 2008 global financial crisis by announcing a deal to form a coalition government with the Liberals at the federal level. The abortive coalition was to be based on pledges to implement C\$50 billion in corporate tax cuts, make “fiscal responsibility” the government’s first priority, and wage war in Afghanistan through 2011.

In Ontario, the NDP has spent the intervening decade proving to big business that it can serve as a reliable instrument for advancing its interests. Between 2012 and 2014, Andrea Horwath’s NDP caucus ensured that the Wynne government, which held only a minority of seats, continued in office by providing it with parliamentary support. This included voting for two austerity budgets that among other things initiated the four-year health spending freeze now so loudly criticized by Horwath.

During the last election campaign in 2014, the NDP’s campaign was so right-wing that Wynne’s Liberals, notwithstanding the fact that they had presided over more than a decade of budget cutting and privatization, were able to outflank the NDP on the “left.”

The NDP is pursuing the same course this time around. Horwath has all but given up attacking the Liberals for their reactionary, anti-worker record, and has instead sought to distinguish her party from the government by promising that unlike the Liberals, the NDP can be trusted to carry out its election promises.

As workers in Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Atlantic provinces can attest, the NDP is no less determined than the Liberals to defend the interests of the corporate elite. Whenever NDP governments have held power in these provinces, they have come into headlong conflict with the working class, imposing regressive tax increases, public sector “wage restraint,” privatization, and public service cuts



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