

Ontario Liberals face electoral oblivion in June 7 provincial vote

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Although Ontario's June 7 provincial election is still nearly three weeks away, it is clear that the governing Liberals are headed for a massive defeat. After 15 years in power, during which time they have slashed public spending, repeatedly criminalized worker job-actions, privatized public utilities, and further reduced taxes for big business and the rich, the Liberals are struggling to stay above 20 percent in the polls.

To this point, it is the right-wing, populist businessman Doug Ford who has been the principal beneficiary of the popular anger against the Liberals, who have been eagerly supported by the trade union bureaucracy throughout their tenure in office. After waging a Trump-style campaign to win the Progressive Conservative (PC) leadership earlier this year, Ford has largely been accepted by the corporate elite and its media mouthpieces as Ontario's premier-in-waiting. A concerted media campaign has sought to downplay his similarities to Trump, even though his calls for slashing billions in government "waste," cutting already minimal corporate taxes and environmental and workplace regulations, and demagogic attacks on the "elites" resemble nothing so much as the fascist-minded billionaire's 2016 election campaign.

Ford's sudden rise to the leadership of Ontario's traditional alternate party of government was no accident. The position of PC leader came open in late January when Patrick Brown, a former Stephen Harper acolyte, was felled by unsubstantiated charges of sexual misconduct. The PC leadership, frustrated by Brown's efforts to pick up votes by shifting the party to the "center," threw him to the wolves within a matter of hours of the allegations coming to light.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, "Nothing progressive can come out of the removal of Brown...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."

Big business demands a further lurch right

The ruling elite's determination to shift politics sharply right in Canada's most populous province is bound up with the deepening crisis of Canadian capitalism, under conditions of mounting global

geopolitical and economic instability. Trump's "America First" program, which has included massive additional tax handouts to the corporate elite and the adoption of economic nationalist measures that threaten to sideswipe the Canadian bourgeoisie, has led to increased calls within ruling circles for an even more aggressive assault on the working class, so as to bolster Canadian "competitiveness."

Last week, Magna CEO David Walker claimed rising costs were placing the future of its Ontario auto-parts plants at risk, while Royal Bank of Canada CEO David McKay said governments need to address Canada's "competitiveness challenge" "with tremendous urgency."

Big business has become increasingly critical of the two-and-a-half-year-old federal Liberal government, with which the Ontario Liberals are closely allied. There is much griping over the Liberals' failure to push through the building of oil pipelines to tidewater in the face of public opposition and to press forward with the wholesale privatization of public infrastructure through their new Canadian Infrastructure Bank. Additionally, while there is universal support within the ruling circles for the Liberals' militarist program, including a 70 percent hike in defence spending over the next decade, military-security experts and much of the media complain that Trudeau is not moving fast enough to implement it, especially in the area of military procurement.

Such concerns have yet to translate into an open revolt by sections of the ruling elite against Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the federal Liberal governments. But there is a strong establishment consensus that Kathleen Wynne and her Ontario Liberal government are long past their "best before date." Big business is furious that the Liberals, having enforced ruthless austerity, especially from 2010 through 2016, made a cynical feint left over the past year in the hopes of avoiding an electoral rout. This included raising the provincial minimum wage to \$14 an hour, and promising some modest social spending increases, financed through deficit-spending, in their pre-election budget.

Another major concern for the ruling elite, albeit one that at this point is less openly discussed, is the growth of working-class struggle. In line with strikes by teachers across the United States, industrial workers and public servants in Germany, and railway workers in France, strikes and protests by workers in Ontario and other provinces have increased over the past year. Moreover, in many of these struggles, including recent strikes at two auto plants in Ajax and Windsor, Ontario, and at Caesars Hotel and Casino

also in Windsor, workers have voted down concessionary contracts negotiated by their ostensible union representatives.

In the final hours before the Ontario legislature was dissolved due to the impending election, the Liberals unsuccessfully attempted to pass an “emergency law” illegalizing the now two-and-half month-old strike by 3,000 York University contract faculty and graduate assistants (see: “Ontario Liberals attempt to legislate end to York University strike”).

The unions’ close alliance with the Liberals was their response to the last period of major class battles in Ontario, when hundreds of thousands took to the streets to protest the “Common Sense Revolution” of PC Premier Mike Harris. In the fall of 1997, teachers mounted an illegal strike to oppose the Harris government’s assault on public education. But when Harris declared his government would not relent, clearly posing the need for a political general strike aimed at driving his government from office, the unions shut the strike down and scuttled the anti-Harris movement.

Soon after the Canadian Auto Workers union (the current-day Unifor) and the teachers’ unions formed the Working Families Ontario coalition to funnel millions of dollars into campaigns to elect Liberals, who were touted as “progressives” and friends of labour.

The NDP’s rightwing record

Fearful that their identification with concession-contracts and their close ties to the pro-austerity Liberals have undermined their ability to police the working class as it enters a new era of bitter class struggles, many of Ontario’s unions have now decided to distance themselves from the sinking Liberal ship.

Instead of championing “strategic voting” for the Liberals, a growing number of unions are throwing their political and organizational muscle behind their longtime ally, the social-democrats of the Ontario New Democratic Party (NDP). This began last fall, when to the dismay of the Unifor, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) voted to endorse the NDP in the 2018 provincial election. Earlier this month, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, which like the other teachers’ unions was long closely allied with the Liberals, also endorsed the NDP.

Although big business, and the political machines of ex-Premier Harris and Conservative Prime Ministers Harper and Brian Mulroney have rallied behind Ford, it is far from a foregone conclusion that the PCs will secure a parliamentary majority or even win the election.

Whilst Ford, exploiting the unions’ identification with Wynne and systematic suppression of the class struggle, has been able to garner support among sections of working people, especially in economically hard-hit south-western Ontario, among the majority of workers and youth there is deep-felt opposition to Ford and his reactionary agenda, which includes appeals to the religious right.

This opposition has found distorted expression in rising support for the NDP, which after years of garnering support from little

more than a fifth of the electorate, is now polling over 30 percent support.

Well aware that there is mounting anger in the working class, sections of the media and the trade union bureaucracy are now endeavoring to promote ONDP leader Andrea Horwath as an advocate for working people and a “true progressive.”

Horwath’s platform, released last month and praised by the Liberal-aligned *Toronto Star*, contains a number of modest social spending proposals that, in the unlikely event they were implemented, would do nothing to end deep poverty, economic insecurity and social inequality in Canada’s traditional industrial heartland.

Any suggestion the NDP would even begin to reverse the decades of attacks on the working class is refuted by the party’s long record of supporting and implementing right-wing policies in Ontario and across Canada. The social democrats responded to the 2008 economic crisis, which was used the world over by the ruling class to tear up workers’ rights and make available billions to the banks, by seeking a coalition with the Liberals at the federal level. The abortive coalition agreement included pledges to slash corporate taxes by \$50 billion, wage war in Afghanistan, and make fiscal responsibility the government’s first priority.

While the ruling elite’s continued support for Harper’s Conservatives prevented the NDP from entering government with the big business Liberals in Ottawa, the NDP first under the late Jack Layton and then the ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet minister Tom Mulcair continued to boost the Liberals as a “progressive” alternative to Harper.

Horwath pursued essentially the same policy at the provincial level, albeit by propping up a minority Liberal government at Queen’s Park rather than joining the cabinet as part of a coalition government. This arrangement, which lasted between 2012 and 2014, allowed Wynne to pass two austerity budgets that included devastating cuts to health care and education spending.

During the 2014 election campaign, Horwath was so determined to win a hearing from big business that she campaigned to the right of the Liberals, who regained their majority with the support of the OFL and its “Stop Hudak! Anybody but Conservative” campaign.

The intervening period has only served to underscore the utterly fraudulent character of the claim workers could stop the big-business assault by supporting the Liberals. Social inequality is at unprecedented levels in Ontario, low-wage and precarious employment have exploded, and public services have been cut to the bone.

The fact that the corporatist trade union bureaucracy is now gravitating towards Horwath and the NDP is a further warning that if the social-democrats come to power, she will lead a right-wing, anti-working class government.



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