

Ontario's Ford-led government initiates class-war assault

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Ontario's Premier-designate—the right-wing populist, millionaire businessman Doug Ford—imposed a public-sector hiring freeze Monday, as well as ordering all provincial ministries to severely curtail discretionary spending. The measures are meant to underline the incoming Progressive Conservative government's determination to slash public spending.

In campaigning for the June 7 provincial election, Ford vowed to cut the government's annual budget by \$6 billion a year or 4 percent through “efficiency savings.” Though Ford demagogically insisted this could be done without any job cuts, his hiring freeze has already exposed such claims as a fraud. Thousands of jobs will be eliminated in the months ahead as civil servants, hospital workers, and other public sector workers who retire or seek employment elsewhere are not replaced.

The government is also moving forward with an “independent audit” of the government's finances, with the transparent aim of declaring the province's fiscal situation to be even graver than previously believed. To lay the political groundwork for a massive new assault on health care, education and other vital public services, the corporate media has for months been lecturing Ontarians that the province is one of the most indebted “subnational jurisdictions” in the world.

Ford and his aides have also announced that he will make good on his promise to eliminate the Liberals' cap-and-trade carbon pricing mechanism, which will cost the province hundreds of millions in revenue annually, and that his government stands ready to criminalize the strike by York University graduate teaching and research assistants. The threat of such legislation was already invoked by a section of the CUPE Local 3903 leadership to prevail on contract faculty to break ranks with the three-and-a-half-month-old strike and vote to return to work last week.

In a further sign of the incoming Tory government's right-wing, big business agenda, Ford has declared that he stands “shoulder to shoulder” with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his federal Liberal government in answering the Trump administration's tariffs on Canadian aluminum and steel imports with retaliatory tariffs. Ford's full-throated support won praise from Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland, who said that it was critical Canadians work as a “united team” in confronting the United States in the NAFTA renegotiation.

In reality, Trudeau, Ford and Canada's ruling elite are intent on fighting their battles for market-share in the US and around the world at the expense of working people, while offering

Washington still closer cooperation in its predatory wars and global military-strategic offensives in exchange for secure access to the American market.

The billions in threatened losses for businesses from Trump's tariffs are to be clawed back through a stepped up assault on the working class, including further cuts to public services, deregulation and privatization. As Ford spelled out in his first remarks addressing Trump's tariffs, his response will be to ensure that Ontario is “open for business” by reducing corporate taxes below the new super-low US rates set under Trump and by cutting “red tape,” i.e. gutting environmental regulations and labour standards.

Ford's denunciations of the downtown Toronto “elite” and claims to stand up for the “hard-working taxpayer” are meant to camouflage an anti-working class agenda that will go far beyond the “Common Sense Revolution” of the Mike Harris-led Ontario Conservative government of the 1990s, and Stephen Harper's decade-long federal Conservative government.

After 15 years of Ontario Liberal austerity measures, Ford's plan to slash billions in government “waste” will mean the evisceration of what remains of public and social services.

To carry out this reactionary agenda, Ford has surrounded himself with veterans of the Harris and Harper governments, as well as of the Toronto municipal administration led by his late brother, Rob Ford.

Doug Ford's rise is part of a rightward lurch in bourgeois politics worldwide. He will be sworn in on Friday, June 29, just three weeks after the coming to power in Italy of a far-right coalition of the Five Star Movement and the Lega committed to deporting over half a million refugees. The far-right is now also in government in Austria, and in Germany the AfD, which denounces refugees in language patterned after that of the Nazis, forms the official opposition. The Trump administration, meanwhile, is pursuing trade war, detaining and witch hunting immigrants, and preparing for global military conflict.

This rightward shift is rooted in the ever deepening global capitalist crisis. Austerity, rampant social inequality, and decades of wars and escalating geopolitical tensions have undermined the structures and political parties that the bourgeoisie used to regulate class and interstate relations in the post-World War II era.

While Ford secured the Ontario premiership by running for one of the province's three traditional parties, he made an explicit, if totally hollow and demagogic, appeal as an “outsider” who shared

the public's anger over the complacency and indifference of the "elites" and would shake things up.

The narrowing base of support for Canada's established parties, like traditional parties of government the world over, was exemplified by the collapse in support for the Ontario Liberals on June 7. They won just 19 percent of the popular vote, their worst-ever result in Ontario in either a federal or provincial election, and captured only seven seats, leaving them one shy of the number required for official party status in the legislature.

Although sections of the bourgeoisie have expressed concern about Ford's personal volatility and readiness to make populist promises (like cutting gas prices), the overwhelming majority has swung behind his government as a vehicle for pushing politics across Canada sharply to the right.

At the same time, they are rightly apprehensive that sooner rather than later, popular opposition will erupt against Ford's reactionary policies.

With the aim of diverting and politically derailing working-class resistance to the Ford government, a coalition of trade unions, middle-class protest groups, and newly-elected NDP politicians gathered outside the Ministry of Labour last Saturday.

The demonstration was called by the "Fight for \$15 and Fairness," an alliance of union bureaucrats and the pseudo-left that hailed the modest minimum-wage increase the Liberals implemented earlier this year as a "victory." The political orientation of the demonstration's organizers was summed up by their decision to parade 21 newly-elected NDP legislators and the lone Green legislator on stage and to proclaim them "our fighters," because they signed a meaningless pledge to oppose Ford's plan to scrap the planned January 2019 increase in the provincial minimum to \$15 per hour. As if the character of the pro-war, pro-austerity NDP can be changed by a few signatures on a piece of paper and the election of a few left-talking careerists into parliament!

"Social justice" activist and author Naomi Klein, who spent the election campaign boosting the social-democratic NDP as the antidote to "Trumpism," told the roughly 2,000 in attendance that they should form a "progressive rainbow" coalition to replace Ford. Making clear that such an alliance would include sections of the Liberals and the entire trade union bureaucracy, Klein shared the speakers' platform with Ontario Federation of Labour President Chris Buckley.

Ontario's unions connived with the Liberals throughout their fifteen years in office, suppressing the class struggle and mobilizing support for them at election time in the name of preventing the election of a hard-right government. For two-and-half years ending in June 2014, the OFL gave its whole-hearted support to the NDP's propping up of a Liberal minority government as it implemented a series of brutal austerity budgets and criminalized teacher job action. Then in the 2014 election, the unions backed an "Anybody but [then PC leader Tim] Hudak campaign," which helped the Liberals regain a parliamentary majority.

While Buckley blustered last Saturday about the need for "solidarity" and a "fight back," the OFL president has already issued an appeal to Ford for a face-to-face meeting. The Tories

have traditionally shunned the corporatist ties that the Liberals and NDP favor with the unions, so as to use them in enforcing attacks on the working class. But Buckley and the union bureaucracy are no doubt hoping they can reach an accommodation with the Tory government on the basis of their common embrace of economic nationalism and trade war measures.

The pathetic appeals by Buckley to Ford and to the NDP to protect the workers' interests stand in stark contrast to the growing militancy among the working class. Across Ontario and Canada, strikes and working class protests are on the rise.

None of the speakers on the platform felt the need to address what happened the last time a mass movement broke out in Ontario against a right-wing Tory government. From 1995 through 1997, Ontario was convulsed by a wave of one-day strikes, mass demonstrations and a province-wide illegal teachers' strike. Fearing the movement was becoming a political challenge to the Harris government, the unions shut it down. Soon after, with the Canadian Auto Workers (the current-day Unifor) in the lead, the union bureaucracy formed an intimate partnership with the big business Liberals, including through their Working Families Coalition, which stumped for the Liberals in the name of "strategic voting."

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to workers and young people at last Saturday's demonstration, which was dominated by supporters of the union bureaucracy and pseudo-left organizations like Fightback and the International Socialists. Several told our reporters that they viewed the NDP as a "lesser of three evils" or that had they campaigned for the party during the election campaign.

Marilyn, a physician from Waterloo, told the WSWS, "It is inherently unfair that the gap between rich and poor is widening instead of narrowing, that people have to struggle so much for survival." Asked what had convinced her to attend the protest, Marilyn added, "I'm here because I'm a physician and I see the importance of people having a living wage in terms of addressing poverty which is inextricably linked to wellness, wellbeing and health."



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