

Ontario's new Tory government slashes social spending, scapegoats refugees

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Having formally taken office June 29, Ontario Premier Doug Ford and his Conservative government have moved quickly to shift politics in Ontario and across Canada sharply right.

The Ford government has made a series of policy announcements aimed at demonstrating the new government's resolve to slash social spending, while further reducing taxes for big business and the rich. It has also underlined its support for a reactionary, "tough on crime" agenda and is employing Trump-style rhetoric to scapegoat refugee claimants for Ontario's chronic lack of social housing and dilapidated public services.

During the election campaign, Ford demagogically vowed to eliminate \$6 billion in annual public spending by cutting "waste" and to order a line audit of the government's books by "independent" experts. Even the bourgeois media has interpreted the latter pledge as a ruse meant to provide Ford with a pretext for repudiating his snake-oil promises of increased spending on health care and education and for imposing far greater cuts than his promised four percent of current provincial spending.

As a down payment on the coming austerity drive, Ford has imposed a provincial government hiring ban, an across-the-board freeze on incidental expenditures, and an indefinite wage freeze for civil service managers and administrators.

Within hours of the government taking office, Health Minister Christine Elliott made sweeping regressive changes to a recently introduced, aged-limited Pharmacare program that provided free prescription drugs for all Ontarians aged 24 or under. Now these benefits will be restricted to those without any existing drug coverage.

In a provocative and politically inflammatory move, Ford announced last Thursday, just as he was to have his first meeting with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, that his government was repudiating the previous Ontario government's agreement with Ottawa to jointly provide services to migrants fleeing the Trump administration's anti-immigrant witch hunt—people he labelled "irregular border crossers."

Ford blamed Trudeau for the increased number of refugee claimants, a reference to Trudeau's hypocritical 2016 statement welcoming immigrants to Canada. Employing the rhetoric of

Trump and European ultra-right forces like the National Front in France and the Alternative for Germany, he went on to cynically accuse the refugees of endangering Ontarians access to public services.

"The federal government encouraged illegal border crossers to come into our country," declared Ford, a millionaire businessman and Trump acolyte, and "continues to usher people across the U.S.-Quebec border into Ontario. This has resulted in a housing crisis, and threats to the services that Ontario families depend on."

Following what was described as a testy meeting between Ford and Trudeau, Lisa Macleod, the provincial minister overseeing the immigration file, repeated Ford's vow that the Ontario government will henceforth contribute not a penny to assisting the refugee claimants, as well as his slanderous claim that, after a quarter-century of social spending budget cuts carried out by successive Ontario NDP, Conservative and Liberal governments, refugees are "putting a strain on many of our public resources."

Ford has also come into conflict with the Trudeau government over his jettisoning of the previous government's cap-and-trade carbon pricing system, which satisfied Ottawa's requirement for all provinces to impose some form of price, or tax, on carbon. Ford's move is supported by a faction of the Canadian bourgeoisie, led by the oil and gas industry and sections of the Toronto-based financial elite, that believes Canada should follow Trump's lead in abandoning the Paris Climate Accord, so it can exploit to the hilt the advantage it enjoys over many of its imperialist rivals as a major producer of carbon-based energy.

Despite concerns over Ford's crude demeanor, penchant for right-wing bombast, and staggering ignorance, and their fears he could become a lightning rod for popular opposition to austerity and social inequality, decisive sections of the ruling class swung behind a Conservative victory in the June 7 provincial election, with a view to intensifying the class war assault on the working class.

Working in close cooperation with the trade union bureaucracy, the 15-year-old Ontario Liberal government had imposed years of austerity, while reducing the corporate tax rate to the lowest in the country. But big business soured on

Kathleen Wynne and her Liberals when, in the face of electoral oblivion, they made a feint left, and allowed the province's budget to go back into deficit. And did so under conditions where corporate leaders were claiming that their "competitive position," i.e., their ability to attract investor support and make profits, had been imperiled by Trump's tax cuts, gutting of regulations, and trade-war tariffs.

Through their support for a hard-right government in Ontario, the country's most populous province, Canada's corporate elite is also signaling to Trudeau that they expect his government to pursue a more aggressive policy, both internationally, including by delivering on his promise to hike military spending by 70 percent over the next decade, and at home, against the working class.

The day Ford was sworn in as premier, the *National Post*, the standard-bearer of the neoconservative right, published an editorial titled "Doug Ford can make Ontario great again by learning from Trump." Claiming Ontario had been "run into the shoals" by a Liberal government that had presided over an "intrusive and out of control regulatory state" and racked up "runaway debt," the editorial called on the Ford government to take an axe to social spending and redistribute wealth to the richest social layers. "The Republican administration in the US," it declared, "has shown once again what a powerful tonic it can be to roll back a business-stifling over-regulating nanny state while reforming taxes to boost growth. ... In the first 17 months of his presidency, Donald Trump has repudiated for good the dismal Obama-era defeatists who insisted that the sun had set on the economic miracle of Western capitalism and innovation and truly booming growth could never happen again."

The *Post* urged Ford to get on with it, calling on him to eschew his "usual impulse to sugarcoat the truth with ... populist slogans" and instead press forward with "change" that will "hurt."

Ford is only too eager to oblige. He has indicated that if the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) does not corral striking York University teaching and research assistants back to work, his government will adopt strikebreaking legislation when the Ontario parliament reconvenes next week.

Well aware that the impending brutal assault on public services and working people will trigger a popular backlash, the Ford government is moving to strengthen the state's repressive apparatus and the Conservatives' already close ties to an increasingly politically active police. On the eve of its coming into effect, Ford announced he was suspending Bill 175, Liberal legislation that would have enhanced the powers of Ontario's police oversight body, the Special Investigations Unit, to investigate police misconduct, saying this would "hurt policing efforts."

Significantly, Ford first announced this move not in a press release, but in a letter to the province's most important police associations, which had vehemently complained that any

increased oversight of its actions, such as the brutal suppression of the 2010 anti-G-20 protests or restrictions on "carding" (racial profiling), would hamper police work and threaten public safety.

Working class opposition to the Ford government is already emerging and will grow rapidly. But if it is to become a genuine working-class counter offensive, it must break free of the political and organizational control of the pro-capitalist trade unions and the social-democratic politicians of the NDP and be armed with a socialist program—the fight for working-class political power and the reorganization of socio-economic life to make fulfilling social needs not profit the animating principle in Ontario, across Canada and internationally.

The unions and NDP have responded to the ever-widening big business assault over the past four decades by moving ever further to the right, jettisoning their reform programs and imposing concessions and austerity.

They opened the door for Ford to come to power, in part by exploiting popular anger over the decimation of industrial jobs and stagnant and declining wages, through their systematic suppression of the class struggle and close collaboration with the pro-austerity Liberal governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne and their continuing collaboration with the supposedly "progressive" federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau.

The NDP, which imposed a wage and job-cutting "social contract" the one and only time it held office in Ontario, propped up a minority Liberal government for two-and-a-half years, ending in 2014, as it slashed social spending and imposed concession contracts on teachers by criminalizing teacher job action.

The unions, with Unifor in the lead, funneled millions of dollars to the Liberals in successive election campaigns, beginning in 1999—an alliance struck in the aftermath of the unions' scuttling of the mass working class upsurge against the Thatcherite policies of the Harris Conservative government.

With Ford now in power, the unions have resorted to pathetic appeals for him to meet with them. An Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) statement issued the same day Ford was sworn said it is "eager to begin discussions with the government on how to best safeguard the rights of workers in the province of Ontario."



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