Ontario government repudiates resettlement agreement, scapegoats refugees

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Ontario's new Conservative government, led by the right-wing populist Doug Ford, is mounting a reactionary anti-immigrant campaign. Since taking power last month, Ford and other leading government officials have been accusing desperate refugees fleeing the Trump administration's anti-immigrant witch hunt of taxing provincial services and imperiling Ontarians' access to them.

Shortly before his first official meeting with Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on July 5, Ford announced his government was withdrawing its support for a "resettlement" agreement signed last year between the Ontario and federal governments that provided minimal support to the asylum-seekers who have fled the United States for Canada out of fear of persecution and deportation.

Ontario will no longer provide any support for the refugee-claimants. All costs must now be borne by Ottawa and its assistance to refugees must be provided without access to provincial facilities or expertise.

The Progressive Conservatives' xenophobic campaign is aimed at diverting attention away from their right-wing, pro-big business agenda and whipping up racism and chauvinism to divide the working class. Since coming to power on June 29, the Ford government has vowed to drastically cut social spending, slash taxes for big business and the rich, and pursue a "tough on crime" agenda.

The Trudeau government's attempt to pose as a friend of the refugees and a principled opponent to Ford is hypocritical and fraudulent. Trudeau and Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale regularly boast about Canada's intimate and expanding collaboration with the US Department of Homeland Security and American immigration authorities, which are currently mounting nationwide raids on workplaces to seize undocumented immigrants and refusing to reunite families they cruelly separated at the border.

The Liberals' "pro-refugee" and "humanitarian" rhetoric is all the more cynical given the fact that they and the Canadian ruling class are directly responsible for the growing number of refugees fleeing war, persecution, and economic dislocation. The Liberal Party has always been a fierce defender of Canadian imperialism. From the Chrétien government in the 1990s through the current Trudeau government, the Liberals have supported Canada assuming a leading role in virtually every US-led war and military-security offensive, including those that have ravaged North Africa, the Middle East and Afghanistan, and are staunch supporters of IMF structural adjustments programs that have caused social dislocation across Africa and Latin America.

Trudeau responded to Ford's harsh criticisms of the Liberals for having created a "mess" at the border by appointing Bill Blair, as part of a cabinet shuffle, to a newly created post of minister of border security and organized crime. Toronto's chief of police from 2005 to 2015, Blair presided over the vicious crackdown on protests against the 2010 Toronto G20 summit.

The refugee resettlement agreement between Ontario and Ottawa was signed by the previous provincial Liberal government following a spike in the number of refugees coming to Canada via the US. Numbers increased following Trump's announcement that his administration would end "Temporary Protected Status" for hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador and Honduras. The deal, while underfunded and inadequate, provided some aid to refugees and helped relocate some of the refugees—who were mainly crossing into Canada through Roxham road in St-Bernard-de-Lacolle, Quebec—to Ontario.

In announcing and defending his government's scrapping of the resettlement deal, Ford and Community and Social Services Minister Lisa Macleod have used the

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chauvinist tropes of Trump, France's National Front, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and other European far-right forces. They have denounced refugee claimants as “illegal” immigrants and accused them of undermining Ontarians’ access to social services.

Ford’s press secretary, Simon Jefferies, complained, “The federal government encouraged illegal border-crossers to come into our country, and the federal government continues to usher people across the US-Quebec border into Ontario.” He added, “this has resulted in a housing crisis, and threats to the services that Ontario families depend on.”

The claim that there is no money to help migrants is a lie. In fact, there are resources aplenty, but they are monopolized by big business and the super rich. The social and housing crises in Ontario are the result not of desperate refugees, but decades of social spending budget cuts carried out by successive NDP, Conservative, and Liberal governments, at both the federal and provincial level.

Ford merely expresses more bluntly what an important section of the ruling class believes: that any government spending dedicated to refugees is an intolerable drain on their bank accounts and stock portfolios. Their attempts to scapegoat refugees go hand in hand with calls for the accelerated destruction of public services for the working class and tax cuts for the rich. For the ruling elite, the only acceptable immigration system is one entirely controlled by the state and tied to big business' labor market needs.

Organizations that assist refugee claimants say they fear the impact of the Ford government’s anti-refugee rhetoric. Debbie Douglas, executive director of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, said, "We know from experience that whenever any population is demonized or belittled, it affects public opinion." Debbie Hill-Corrigan, executive director of Sojourn House in Toronto, told the *Chronicle Journal* that Ford’s policies and the idea that migrants drain social resources "pits (Canadians) against refugees."

Ford’s attack on asylum-seekers has the full support of the federal Conservatives and a significant section of the corporate media. In a statement, the federal Conservatives declared Ford was protecting “the interests of taxpayers and the integrity of our asylum system.”

The Conservatives are pressing the Trudeau government to expand application of the reactionary Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement, under which refugee claimants who cross into Canada from the US at an official entry point are immediately returned to the US. To prevent asylum-seekers from exercising their right under international law to apply for refugee status when they cross the border outside an official checkpoint, the Conservatives are urging the government to declare the entire Canada-US border an official entry point. Ottawa, they contend, would then be able to circumvent international law and immediately apprehend and return to the US all refugee claimants.

Thus far the Liberals have insisted that this is not necessary, because under Canada's reactionary immigration laws the vast majority of asylum-seekers will soon be expelled.

Ford’s racist diatribe is not unique. In Quebec, the political establishment has been whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment for some time. The leader of the pro-independence Parti Québécois, Jean-François Lysee, has denounced the asylum seekers as “Trudeau's guests,” complained about the supposedly large sums being spent on assisting them, and called for a border fence and the deployment of more police at the border. The Coalition Avenir Quebec, a right-wing populist party that is leading the polls in the run-up to the October 1 Quebec election, is proposing to deny citizenship rights and ultimately expel immigrants who fail a French-language test.

Trudeau’s response to Trump’s anti-immigrant measures is two-faced. While posturing as pro-refugee, his government has let only a tiny number of carefully selected and vetted Syrian refugees come to Canada and is deporting the vast majority of asylum-seekers who are crossing into Canada from the US. According to Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen, of the Haitian asylum-seekers whose claims have been processed, 90 percent have been sent back to what is the Western hemisphere’s poorest country.

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