

Ontario's Tory government slashes welfare benefits, vows further cuts

Roger Jordan
4 August 2018

Just weeks after taking power, Ontario's Progressive Conservative government, led by the right-wing populist Doug Ford, has launched a major assault on welfare recipients, society's most vulnerable and impoverished.

Social Services Minister Lisa MacLeod announced Tuesday that the 3 percent increase in welfare benefits adopted by the previous Liberal government will be slashed to just 1.5 percent. The cut affects both those deemed "employable," who are enrolled in the Ontario Works program, and those receiving disability payments.

The government is also canceling a three-year, \$150 million pilot project to test replacing the current welfare system with a "basic income" payment. Under the pilot project, which began last year and involved 4,000 low-income people, a single person was to receive up to \$16,989 in provincial assistance annually—still far below the poverty line.

Under conditions where rents, food and other costs are rising rapidly, the planned 3 percent increase would have at best meant that welfare recipients in Canada's most populous province were treading water.

But, taking a page from the playbook of Mike Harris, who on becoming Ontario premier in 1995 cut welfare benefits by more than 21 percent, MacLeod and Ford are planning to eviscerate the current social assistance program.

Speaking at a press conference Tuesday, MacLeod declared the current welfare system irretrievably broken and announced that the government has set a 100-day deadline for coming up with a plan to transform it, from one that gives "handouts that do little if anything to break the cycle of poverty," into one that is "sustainable."

Indicating that the government intends to dramatically expand "workfare" schemes under which benefits are tied to enrollment in cheap-labor, job-training programs, Macleod pontificated that, "The best welfare measure is a job." She also said that she has asked the province's

auditor-general to investigate what she called "hundreds of millions of dollars" in fraudulent social assistance payments.

Ford ran a hard-right, Trump-style campaign in which he railed against the "waste" of tax-payer dollars, public sector workers and the traditional political establishment. He also vowed that his government would find \$6 billion in annual savings, of which the latest attack on welfare is only a small fraction.

The next volley of social spending cuts is likely to be launched at the end of August, when a commission appointed by Ford in mid-July to review Ontario's finances is scheduled to present its report. To head the commission, Ford chose former British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell, whose Liberal government provoked widespread strikes and popular protests with savage attacks on public spending and workers' rights during the 2000s.

The Ford government is already preparing the groundwork to use the report's results to justify a massive assault on public services. Finance Minister Vic Fedeli declared that the government is "prepared for the likelihood that we might not like what we see. But unless we accurately diagnose the sickness we will not be able to prescribe the right cure."

The claim that there is no money for vitally-needed public and social services is a flat-out lie.

Under more than 15 years of Liberal Party rule, the trade union-backed governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne waged war on the wages and working conditions of workers, privatized public assets such as Hydro One, and slashed public spending, including for health and education, to the bone.

These policies were aimed at redistributing wealth upwards to the rich and super-rich, including by cutting tax rates for big business and those in the highest-income brackets to record lows.

Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government is pursuing the same agenda. It has maintained the ultra-low corporate tax rates introduced by the Harper Conservative government; established, with its new Canada Infrastructure bank, a mechanism for privatizing public infrastructure; announced a 70 percent hike in military spending over the next decade; and further expanded Canada's involvement in the major US military-strategic offensives, in the oil-rich Middle East and against Russia and China.

Earlier this week, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, a left-liberal think tank, published a report that showed the country's wealthiest 87 families now own more wealth than the poorest third of Canadians—12 million people.

Ford's bluster about speaking on behalf of the little guy against the political elite notwithstanding, he is a ruthless representative of this super-rich oligarchy. His rise to the leadership of the Progressive Conservatives by means of a bogus sex scandal and his subsequent populist election campaign were promoted by a pliant corporate media and powerful sections of big business which see him as a useful instrument for shifting politics, in Ontario and across Canada, sharply right. In line with this, Ford has already outlawed a four-month strike by teaching and research assistants at Toronto's York University.

Ford and his Conservatives are seeking to divert attention from their pro-corporate agenda, incite reaction, and split the working class by whipping up hostility to refugees fleeing Trump's anti-immigrant witch hunt. This has included blaming refugee claimants for a housing shortage that is the result of decades of cuts to social housing carried out by all three levels of government and all three parties, the Liberals, New Democrats (NDP) and Conservatives.

In anticipation of mounting social opposition, the Ford government is also mounting a right-wing "law and order" campaign and courting the police, with promises of increased spending, tougher laws and by suspending application of a law providing for greater civilian oversight of the police.

The Ford government's initial weeks in power have provided a devastating exposure of the impotence, cowardice, and complicity of the trade union bureaucracy, which for over a decade helped prop up successive Liberal governments as they enforced austerity measures and criminalized strikes. As Ford took office, Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) head Chris Buckley and other top union bureaucrats appealed for a meeting with

the new premier, holding out the hope that the unions could collaborate with the new government.

At the same time, the unions are doing all that they can to restrain the groundswell of popular anger that is building. The only protest sanctioned thus far by the OFL came on June 16, where Buckley shared the platform with newly-elected NDP MPPs. He and other speakers asserted that workers could resist the Ford government's attacks by working in tandem with the rightwing social democrats of the NDP—a party which between 2012 and 2014 propped up a Liberal minority government as it imposed austerity and broke strikes; and which, the one and only time it ever held office in Ontario (1990–95), implemented a job and wage-cutting "social contract."

After weeks of virtual silence in the face of non-stop provocations by the Ford government, the OFL finally bestirred itself this week, not to protest the vicious attacks on welfare recipients, but to denounce Ford's decision to cut the number of Toronto City Council seats from 47 to 25, less than 90 days before the Oct. 22 municipal election.

In a statement, the OFL provided a model letter for its members to sign and send to Ford, asking him politely to reverse course.

Ford's move is an attack on democratic rights, deliberately aimed at weakening his bourgeois political rivals—the Liberals and NDP—who enjoy more support in Toronto than do his Tories. However, workers cannot beat back such attacks if they appeal, as the unions propose, to the alleged democratic sensibilities of the Toronto City Council, which is staffed by bourgeois politicians subservient to the interests of the corporate elite and aligned with the establishment parties.

Rather the working class must meet big business' class-war assault by mobilizing its industrial strength and transforming itself into a political force. To defend their social rights, workers and youth in Ontario must spearhead a cross-Canada counteroffensive of the working class, directed against the Ford and Trudeau governments and the ruling-class agenda of austerity and war, and at developing a mass movement for a workers' government committed to the socialist reorganization of socio-economic life.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact