

Polls indicate right-wing populist United Conservatives will win Alberta election

Janet Browning and Riksen Stewart
11 April 2019

The United Conservative Party (UCP) enjoys a strong lead in the opinion polls in the run-up to Alberta's April 16 provincial election, and appears all but certain to unseat Premier Rachel Notley and her New Democratic Party (NDP) after just one term in office.

The UCP was formed in 2017 through the merger of the far-right, socially and fiscally conservative Wildrose Party and the Progressive Conservatives, Alberta's traditional party of government. It advocates ruthless austerity and massive corporate tax cuts, and promotes "Alberta First" regionalism and anti-Quebec chauvinism. Led by Jason Kenney, one of the top ministers in Stephen Harper's decade-long federal Conservative government, the UCP is a close ally of the federal Conservative Party and has links to anti-immigrant and other ultra-right forces, including Calgary-based Rebel Media.

Rattled by the post-2013 collapse of Alberta's "oil boom," big business is turning to Kenney and his UCP to mount a frontal offensive against the working class, through massive social-spending cuts, the gutting of environmental and labour standards, and corporate tax cuts.

The push for a UCP government in the country's fourth most populous province is part of a more general lurch right by the Canadian bourgeoisie. Under Harper and now Trudeau, Canadian imperialism has pursued an ever more aggressive role on the world stage, in close alliance with Washington. Over the past nine months, the corporate elite has propelled to power hard-right, anti-immigrant governments in Ontario, under Doug Ford, and in Quebec, under Francois Legault.

In answer to this sharp shift right, which parallels developments in the US, Europe and around the world, the working class must constitute itself as an independent political force and advance its own, socialist, solution to the capitalist crisis.

This requires implacable opposition to the purportedly "progressive" or "left" sections of the political establishment. For decades, whenever they have held office, social-democratic and liberal parties have invariably pursued pro-austerity, pro-war policies and otherwise attacked the working class. It is this that has opened door for right-wing demagogues like Trump, Ford, and now Kenney to hypocritically and cynically make appeals to the grievances and frustrations of working people.

Unexpectedly swept to power in May 2015 on a wave of popular anger over inadequate public services, a lack of affordable housing, and rampant social inequality, Alberta's trade-union backed NDP government has faithfully served the interests of Big Oil and corporate Alberta. It has imposed "restraint" on the province's overburdened health and education systems and pay freezes on public sector workers. While imposing austerity on working people, it shelved plans to increase the royalties paid by oil and natural gas producers and otherwise maintained the so-called Alberta "low-tax advantage." And on the national stage, Notley and her NDP have functioned as close allies of the big-business Trudeau Liberal government, including pushing for the building of pipelines to tidewater.

None of this, however, has stopped Kenney from denouncing Notley and her NDP for purportedly failing to champion Alberta and its oil industry.

Kenney's party is mounting an "Alberta First" regionalist campaign, based on the claim that Alberta is being "short-changed" under current federal-provincial arrangements, even as the development of its oil sector is being thwarted by Ottawa and other provinces. This campaign includes an open appeal to Anglo-chauvinism. Kenney and his supporters routinely denounce the Trudeau Liberal government for its supposed favouritism to Quebec, and they accuse Quebec itself of strangling Alberta's economy, by opposing an oil pipeline to the country's East Coast, even as it "takes Alberta's money"—a reference to Quebec being the largest recipient of federal "equalization" payments.

Kenney is vowing to use all the legal and fiscal means at the Alberta government's disposal to overcome both popular and governmental opposition to new pipelines, including holding a referendum to demand radical changes to the equalization program. A UCP government is also committed to pressing for changes in how public health care is funded, effectively eliminating any federal government role.

Both the downsizing of "equalization" and the replacement of federal funding for Medicare by increased provincial tax "room" are longstanding demands of the most rapacious sections of the ruling class. They want to shatter what remains of minimum national standards for health care and other public

services, with the aim of transferring more wealth to the most privileged sections of society and promoting wholesale privatization.

Neo-conservatives have long advocated such a social counter-revolution. If their reactionary policy prescriptions are now on the verge of becoming Alberta government policy, it is because the province's ruling elite is angered and frustrated at the thwarting of its ambitions. As a result of the fall in world-oil prices and the shale-oil driven emergence of the US as the world's biggest petroleum producer, investment in the high-cost Alberta tar sands has collapsed.

Determined to make good its losses, Alberta's corporate elite is intent on squeezing the working class and driving a harder bargain with its rivals and partners in the Canadian bourgeoisie.

Kenney and his UCP articulate this drive to increase the profits and wealth of the ruling elite in almost unvarnished fashion. Nevertheless, they have been able to attract support from financially pressed current and laid-off energy and construction industry workers, as well as contractors, small businessman and other middle-class elements.

This is due above all to the NDP's rotten record. Since 2014, Alberta's energy sector has been battered, with tens of thousands of relatively well-paid oil workers losing their jobs, forced to accept temporary work, or compelled to accept massive wage cuts. Consumer debt levels are at a record high, and the housing market has collapsed with foreclosed houses remaining unsold for years.

While NDP leader Rachel Notley professed prior to becoming premier that her party would stand up for working people in Alberta, make corporations pay more taxes, and oppose the development of oil pipelines due to environmental concerns, the reality has been very different. The NDP government has done nothing to assist workers hit hard by the crisis, while endeavouring to ensure that Big Oil enjoys the best conditions possible for doing business.

On coming to power in 2015, Notley's government adopted the outgoing Progressive Conservative (PC) government's budget, and immediately froze public sector pay and imposed a hiring freeze. In terms of Notley's support for the big energy companies, right-wing *Calgary Herald* columnist Don Braid once observed, "Premier Rachel Notley didn't just extend an olive branch to oil and gas leaders...she brought the whole tree and shook it, raining down petals of praise and friendship."

In shilling for Big Oil, Notley, it should be noted, has not shied away from playing the Alberta regional card.

So right-wing has been the Notley government that she recently won praise from Danielle Smith, who headed the far-right Wildrose Party when it was Alberta's Official Opposition. Smith compared Notley to former PC Premier Peter Lougheed, who in 1971 founded the PC's 44-year-long provincial governing dynasty. "If you think Lougheed was Alberta's best Premier," wrote Smith in the *Herald*, "I bet you are voting for Notley."

That being said, big business is overwhelmingly behind Kenney, licking its chops at the prospect of launching an all-out onslaught on the public services and social programs on which millions of Albertans rely.

The UCP 2018 policy declaration lays out plans to make Alberta the lowest tax jurisdiction in Canada by reducing taxes for large corporations; to eliminate funding for abortion services and privatize health care; to balance the budget in its first term through social spending cuts; to construct hospitals and schools using the P3 (public-private partnership) model; to ensure equal funding for public and private schools and encourage the expansion of charter schools; and to roll back the C\$15 minimum wage to C\$12.20 per hour.

To enforce its rabidly anti-working class program, the UCP is cultivating ties with right-wing extremist and openly fascist forces. Several UCP meetings have been attended by members of the neo-fascist Soldiers of Odin, which regularly organizes violent anti-immigrant protests. Star UCP candidate and former Harper government official Caylan Ford was forced to resign after online comments were publicized in which she defended the neo-Nazi demonstrators in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017.

That right-wing populist forces are profiting from the social and economic crisis underscores the urgency of the working class intervening independently into political events with its own program. Workers in Alberta seeking a political alternative to the province's right-wing political establishment must turn to their class brothers and sisters across Canada and internationally by taking up the struggle to put an end to the bankrupt capitalist system and replace it with a socialist society. This, above all, requires the building of a new mass working class party committed to a socialist and internationalist program—the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact