

Alberta's UCP government attacks workers, rewards business with tax cuts

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Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and his newly-installed United Conservative Party (UCP) government have lost no time in initiating sweeping attacks on working people.

Since recalling the legislature late last month, the UCP has tabled bills to freeze the province's \$15 minimum wage, slash it for young people, and dramatically reduce corporate taxes.

In the first of what the UCP promises will be two "labour reform" bills this year, the new government is slashing the minimum wage for those 17 and younger. As of the end of this month, Alberta is to have a special sub-minimum youth wage, pegged at just \$13 per hour. The "Make Alberta Open for Business Act" also attacks workers' right to enhanced compensation when they work overtime, and will make it more difficult for workers to get union representation.

To underscore the UCP's commitment to cut corporate taxes and augment the so-called "Alberta Advantage—that is the regime of ultra-low taxes and minimal environmental and other regulatory restraints on big business that has long prevailed in the energy-rich province—Finance Minister Travis Toews has tabled legislation that enshrines the government's promise to slash the provincial corporate tax rate by one-third by 2022.

Alberta's corporate tax rate is to be reduced to 11 percent on July 1, and by a further one percentage-point at the start of each of the next three years. At eight percent, big business, boast Kenney and Toews, will benefit from the country's lowest corporate tax rate, and this will make the province, or so they claim, a magnet for investment.

The corporate tax cuts will exacerbate Alberta's \$7 billion annual budget deficit, which Kenney has pledged to eliminate by 2023, setting the stage for his government to make sweeping cuts to health care, education and other vital public services. These cuts will be inflicted on public infrastructure that has already been ravaged by years of austerity under successive Progressive Conservative and New Democratic Party (NDP) governments.

Kenney has promised a "summer of repeal," in which his government will use its large majority to get rid of a raft of measures implemented by the previous, one-term Rachel Notley-led NDP government. These include laws that protect gay and transgender high school students, set minimum safety and other standards for agricultural workers, and that

established a carbon tax.

A close ally of the federal Trudeau Liberal government, Notley and her NDP touted the modest charge imposed on businesses for their CO-2 emissions as a major step in combatting climate change. But the carbon tax has burdened ordinary people with additional costs in a province where everyone has to pay large energy bills to heat their homes for much of the year.

The path to power for Kenney and his hard-right UCP was paved by Alberta's first-ever trade union-backed NDP government. It imposed social spending cuts, froze public sector workers' wages, and served as a handmaiden for Big Oil, providing it with billions in tax and royalty breaks while pushing for environmentally and socially destructive pipeline and tar sand projects. So rightwing was the Notley government, many media commentators compared it to those led by Peter Lougheed, the founder of the Progressive Conservative political dynasty that ruled the province for more than four decades ending in 2015.

The Notley NDP government's right-wing policies created conditions in which Kenney and the UCP—the result of a merger between the Progressive Conservatives and the socially and fiscally conservative Wildrose Party—could make a limited, right-wing populist appeal to oil industry and other workers adversely impacted by the slump in energy prices and government austerity, even as they basked in the quasi-unanimous support of Big Oil and the rest of the corporate elite.

The unwillingness and inability of the NDP and their trade union allies to mount any genuine opposition to Kenney's ruthless attacks was underscored this past week, as NDP legislators resorted to parliamentary tricks and filibusters to hold up passage of the anti-worker "Make Alberta Open for Business Act" by a few hours. UCP House Leader Jason Nixon took the measure of the NDP's stunt, bluntly telling the *National Post*, "If the Opposition wants to filibuster they're welcome to use the chamber to do that, to get their thoughts on the record. ... (But) we will get our agenda through the House."

The UCP is planning to go much further. Kenney has repeatedly whipped up western and "Alberta First" regionalism and denounced Quebec for being the undue beneficiary of federal largesse. Such attacks, which serve to incite working

people against each other, are aimed not just at bolstering the Alberta elite's push for a greater role in determining national policy. They are aimed at preparing the political-constitutional ground for gutting what remains of federal social spending and for the privatization of health care and other services.

In his right-wing, pro-business onslaught, Kenney is following in the footsteps of Ontario's right-wing populist premier, Doug Ford. In addition to freezing the minimum wage and slashing overtime pay, Ford has cut welfare rates, gutted Ontario's student aid program, slashed education spending, announced plans to legislate a cut in public sector workers' real wages, and provided big business with lucrative tax incentives.

Elected last October, Quebec's Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government shares Kenney's and Ford's ambition of shifting politics sharply right. CAQ Premier Francois Legault has openly supported the Alcoa-owned aluminum smelter ABI in its demands for sweeping concessions from its workers, who have been locked out since January 2018, and has repeatedly attacked industrial workers in Quebec for their "excessive wages." His government has gone even further than that of Ford and Kenney in inciting chauvinism, tabling legislation that restricts immigration and targets religious minorities, especially Muslim women.

Underscoring big business' strong support for Kenney, Ford, and Legault and the offensive they are spearheading against the working class, the corporate media has been at pains to insist that any comparisons with Donald Trump and other right-wing populist and far right leaders internationally are entirely unwarranted.

But while the media has echoed Kenney in depicting the UCP as simply a return to "common sense" Alberta conservatism, his government is breaking new ground on the political right with its close ties to far-right and outright fascist forces.

Evidence of these ties emerged soon after the founding of the UCP. Early in 2018, Kenney was forced to issue a statement expressing his "shock" after it emerged that Adam Strashnok, who led Kenney's call centre during his campaign for the UCP leadership, had posted anti-Semitic comments online and was involved in operating an online store selling white supremacist memorabilia.

Kenney subsequently set up what the mainstream media called an "unprecedented" screening process to weed out any new member with "hateful and extreme views." However, this screening process failed to prevent Kenney and his UCP embracing Caylan Ford as one of their "star" candidates. A former Harper government aide, Ford was forced to renounce her candidacy after she was shown to have made favorable comments about the August 2017 neo-Nazi demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia, during which a counter-protester was killed by a right-wing extremist.

In October 2018, three UCP candidates attended a function with members of the Soldiers of Odin, a group that was founded by a violent neo-Nazi and is classified as an anti-

Muslim hate group. Kenney later dismissed the incident, saying the Soldiers of Odin members had crashed the event.

Eva Kiryakos, another UCP candidate, was compelled to resign after railing on social media against "Germany's migrant rape crisis," a clear reference to the neo-fascist portrayal of African and Middle Eastern immigrants to Europe as a threat to white women. Kiryakos also attacked the LGBT community, declaring, "I should have the right to choose for my children to not be brainwashed into accepting perversions as alternative lifestyles."

There are many ties between the UCP and the far-right, Calgary-based Rebel Media outlet. Led by former Reform Party aide and *National Post* columnist Ezra Levant, Rebel Media has played an increasingly important role in promoting extreme-right politics internationally, including by providing a platform for the British fascist Tommy Robinson and the Canadian white-supremacist and Islamophobe Faith Goldy.

Goldy was fired from Rebel Media after a public outcry over the gushing reporting she provided on the aforementioned neo-Nazi protest in Charlottesville. It was only after the Goldy incident that Hamish Marshall, the federal Conservative Party's 2019 national campaign director and the director of Andrew Scheer's successful 2017 Conservative leadership campaign, resigned as a Rebel Media director.

The cultivation of such far-right forces is being replicated by the political establishment in every country. While the rise of the fascist-minded Donald Trump to the US presidency is its most prominent expression, it is also demonstrated by French President Emmanuel Macron's praise for the Nazi collaborator Marshal Philippe Petain, and the German ruling elite's embrace of the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany, which now forms the official opposition in the German parliament and whose policies are increasingly setting the agenda of the country's coalition government.



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