

Canada to go to polls amid geopolitical crisis, mounting working-class resistance

Roger Jordan
31 August 2019

With less than two months to go before Canada's October 21 federal election, it is already manifestly evident that the official campaign will not seriously address any of the pressing issues confronting the working class.

As Justin Trudeau's Liberals seek to hold onto power in the face of a challenge from the hard-right Conservatives under Andrew Scheer, all of Canada's establishment parties, including the social democratic NDP, are lurching further right.

Elected in 2015 on promises of "sunny ways" and "progressive" change, Trudeau's four years as prime minister have been characterized by a continuation of the militarist, pro-corporate, and anti-worker agenda pursued by Stephen Harper's Tories for almost a decade from 2006 to 2015.

The Trudeau Liberal government has pressed forward with equipping Canada's military with new fleets of warships and warplanes and intends to hike military spending by 70 percent to more than \$32.6 billion by 2026. It has integrated Canada even more fully into US imperialism's principal military-strategic offensives around the world: against Russia and China, and in the oil-rich Middle East. It is also providing a pseudo-democratic cover for the Trump administration's "regime change" operation in Venezuela.

The Liberals have kept public services on rations, including imposing tens of billions in cuts in the transfers Ottawa will make to the provinces to fund health care from 2017 to 2027. They have maintained low taxes for big business and the rich, aided Trump's anti-immigrant witch hunt, and, just as Harper did in 2011, criminalized last fall's postal workers' strike.

Like his father, Pierre Trudeau—who in the 1974 federal election denounced the Conservative threat to impose a 90-day wage freeze, then on returning to power imposed three years of anti-worker wage controls—Trudeau plans to use the Liberals' long-honed tactic of denouncing the Conservatives' right-wing policy prescriptions on the election hustings, only to repackage and implement them once the votes are counted.

However, this ploy is becoming ever more difficult to pull off. There is growing popular dissatisfaction with the entire political establishment, and widespread recognition among working people that Trudeau's "progressive" policies are a sham, consisting as they do of hollow claims of concern about social inequality and precarious employment, and the promotion of manifest forms of identity politics that articulate the concerns and career aspirations of various sections of the upper middle class.

A study released this week by Simon Fraser University found almost 70 percent of respondents believe politicians don't care what ordinary people think, and close to 50 percent said Canada is not governed as a democracy. Meanwhile, a Forum Research Poll, whose results were reported in Tuesday's *Toronto Star*, found that 58 percent of the almost 2,000 people polled had a "positive" view of socialism. Even more than in 2015, the attempt of the Liberals—the capitalist elite's principal party of

government since the beginning of the last century—to pass themselves off as a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives is dependent on their trade unions "allies." Unifor, the country's largest industrial union, and the Canadian Teachers Federation all but transformed their respective conventions this summer into Liberal pre-election rallies, with Trudeau given center stage to deliver keynote speeches. As a whole, the union apparatuses are ploughing millions of dollars into an "Anybody but Conservative" campaign.

The basic message of these right-wing, nationalist organizations, which have suppressed the class struggle for decades, is that to prevent the Conservatives' return to power it is necessary to support a Liberal government of austerity, militarism and war.

War and attacks on democratic rights: the Canadian bourgeoisie lurches to the right

The Liberals, meanwhile, have been waging a scare-mongering campaign against the alleged threat of "foreign interference" in the federal election. This has included the implementation of censorship measures in collaboration with the social media giants Facebook and Twitter, and the rushing through of Bill C-59, which in the name of reforming the Harper's government's draconian 2015 "antiterrorism" law, Bill C-51, gives the country's national-security apparatus still greater powers.

The Liberal government and corporate media have spent the past year demonizing China as a bully attacking Canadian interests. In reality, Ottawa has provoked the conflict by aligning Canada with the Trump administration's escalating campaign of economic and military pressure on Beijing.

Trudeau signed on to Trump's demand that NAFTA be renegotiated to make it a more explicitly US-led trade-war bloc, including provisions specifically targeting China. Then at Washington's behest, he ordered the effective kidnapping of Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou on trumped-up charges. The Liberals, building on the secret 2013 Canada-US Pacific military cooperation agreement, have deployed warships to the South China and East China Seas, and they have supported Washington's repudiation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty (INF), which is intended to clear the way for deploying such weapons against China.

Scheer portrays himself as a disciple of the hard-right Harper, and he and his Conservatives as more ruthless enforcers of the Canadian ruling class's interests at home and abroad. He has cynically and hypocritically attacked the Liberals for "corruption" in relation to the SNC-Lavalin affair, asserting that they have put the interests of Quebec firms ahead of those based in Ontario and, especially, western Canada's energy sector. His campaign combines right-wing demands for tax cuts and austerity in public spending with cynical demagoguery about standing up for the little

guy, summed up in the Tories' thoroughly dishonest election slogan, "Helping Canadians get ahead."

In a major foreign policy address delivered in May, Scheer vowed that a Tory government would align Canada even more closely with Washington, including by following Trump in moving Canada's Israeli embassy to Jerusalem and joining the US ballistic missile defence (BMD) shield. Development of the BMD, its name notwithstanding, is aimed at making a US-led nuclear war against China, Russia, or any other geostrategic rival "winnable." Scheer has also pledged to take a harder line against China, including by immediately banning Huawei from Canada's 5-G network and investing more in the military.

The fact that this reactionary program enjoys growing support within the political and corporate elite reflects the shift of the Canadian bourgeoisie further right. It has already propelled governments led by right-wing populists to power in three of the country's four main provinces over the past fourteen months: Doug Ford in Ontario, François Legault in Quebec, and Jason Kenney in Alberta.

The lurch of bourgeois politics to the right is an international process, exemplified by the rise of Trump in the US, Salvini in Italy, Le Pen in France, and Boris Johnson in Britain. Under conditions of deepening global capitalist crisis, the growth of trade war, and, above all, the resurgence of working-class resistance, ruling elites in every country are preparing to use the most reactionary means to defend their interests.

The New Democratic Party (NDP), Canada's crisis-ridden social democratic party, is part of this rightward shift. It has responded to the growing support within the ruling class for a Scheer-led Conservative government by signaling that it would prop up the big-business Liberals in a minority parliament.

This is in keeping with the NDP's reactionary record. The social democrats have backed Canada's participation in a series of US-led wars, from Yugoslavia, to Afghanistan and Libya, and support rearmament. Whenever the NDP has held power at the provincial level, it has come into headlong conflict with the working class, imposing austerity and using antistrike laws.

In recent months, federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh has mimicked the so-called "progressive" Democrats in the US, calling for a "green new deal" and a national pharmacare program. But, revealingly, Singh has avoided using the word "socialism" like the plague.

Unable to distinguish itself from the Liberals, the NDP's poll numbers have declined sharply, suggesting it will elect even fewer MPs than in 2015, when the party, then led by ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet member Thomas Mulcair, led a "Harper-lite" campaign, promising balanced budgets and increased military spending. Seeing the writing on the wall, more than a third of the NDP's MPs are not even standing for re-election.

The smaller parties

The three smaller parties could prove important, since the polls currently suggest a hung parliament.

The Greens, who currently hold two seats, have seen their support rise, with some polls placing them neck and neck with the NDP. The Greens have gained support due to disaffection with both the Liberals and NDP and increased concern about the ruinous impact of climate change. But they are a right-wing capitalist party, which champions "fiscal responsibility," and voted for the Liberals' Bill C-59. Party leader Elizabeth May earlier this year publicly urged Trudeau to try to hang on to power if the Conservatives win the most seats but fail to secure a parliamentary majority. More recently she has hinted that under certain condition she could back Scheer as prime minister.

The People's Party of Canada, founded last year by former Conservative cabinet minister Maxime Bernier, is running a far-right campaign. Bernier, who only lost the Tory leadership contest to Scheer in 2017 on the 13th ballot, is calling for a dramatic cut in immigration levels, the scrapping of Canada's multiculturalism policy, the elimination of corporate subsidies and the privatization of the post office. He has cultivated ties with alt-right groups, and in a letter protesting his exclusion from the two planned televised debates drew a comparison between his party and "right-wing populist parties" internationally, tacitly admitting that the PPC shares the far-right orientation of the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany, Marine le Pen's National Rally in France, and the Lega in Italy.

The Bloc Quebecois, the federal sister party of the separatist Parti Quebecois, combines Quebec chauvinism with anti-immigrant xenophobia. It intends to place the "defence" of Quebec's chauvinist Bill 21 at the center of its election campaign. This legislation bars many state employees, including teachers, from wearing the hijab or other religious symbols, and bans Muslim women who wear the face-covering niqab or burqa from access to vital public services. In minority parliaments, the BQ has traditionally preferred to work with the Conservatives. However, in 2008 it backed the Liberal-NDP bid to form a coalition government committed to austerity, massive corporate tax cuts, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

Despite the carefully choreographed nature of the official campaign, there are growing signs that an upsurge of class struggle could intrude and disrupt its course. Close to 200,000 teachers in Ontario are on a collision course with Doug Ford's Conservative government, which is vowing to cut their real wages and impose dramatic class-size increases. Teachers in British Columbia are also poised to take strike action, while tens of thousands of workers in the auto and auto parts sectors are closely following the contract dispute between the Detroit Three and its 150,000-strong US workforce.

The trade unions, whether the teachers' unions in Ontario and BC or Unifor in the auto sector, are determined to block the eruption of working-class opposition at all costs. Their focus is on securing Trudeau's re-election so as to defend what the prime minister himself has referred to as the "special partnership" between the Liberals and the unions.

In opposition to this corporatist conspiracy, class-conscious workers must reject all attempts to stampede them into supporting yet another right-wing government, whatever its composition, in the name of keeping out the Conservatives. They must turn to the building of their own independent political party, the Socialist Equality Party, to take forward the fight for a workers' government committed to socialist policies.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact