

Ontario government's legal aid cuts trigger widespread protests

Penny Smith

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The decision of Ontario's Doug Ford-led Conservative government to slash the province's chronically underfunded legal aid system by 30 percent, or \$133 million per year, has triggered widespread protests.

The cuts will devastate this publicly-funded service, which workers and poorer sections of the population, including refugees, have relied on for decades to provide legal representation.

So patently discriminatory is the attack on legal aid, sections of the judiciary have felt compelled to criticize the cuts. Their fear is that the dismantling of legal aid will undermine the popular legitimacy of the courts, by so manifestly demonstrating that all are not "equal before the law."

Speaking at an opening of the courts ceremony in Toronto this month, Ontario Chief Justice George Strathy criticized the ravaging of the legal aid program, declaring, "It increases trial times, places greater demands on public services, and ultimately delays and increases the cost of legal proceedings for everyone. We can also say that public confidence in the administration of justice is enhanced when the most vulnerable in our society are given a voice, so they can truly be heard."

On July 30, nearly fifty protest events were held across the province to condemn the cuts to Legal Aid Ontario, which were unveiled in the Ford government's April budget. Legal aid clinics and organizations that support and advocate for the poor participated, setting up outdoor pop-up legal clinics, and holding protest rallies and discussions.

Avvy Go, the director of Toronto's Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic, told the media, "We want to send a message to the premier ... to tell him to not only stop the cuts, but to reverse the cuts that he has

already done."

Suganthine Sivakumar, who has accessed legal aid services for her son, said that the denial of access to legal aid "will be very hard for us. We are not earning too much money, and as a single mom, it's very hard for me to work two or three jobs to get enough money for our life and lawyer fees."

Legal Aid Ontario assists more than one million low-income Ontario residents each year with domestic violence, family law, child custody, refugee and immigration hearings, and poverty law issues. Ford's cuts will mean that most accused people facing a bail hearing or seeking a review of a bail decision will no longer get legal aid funding to hire their own lawyer.

A further devastating change has been the total elimination of funding for refugee and immigration law services. Seventy percent of refugee claimants in Ontario have hitherto relied on such services for their asylum requests.

The Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), the agency responsible for adjudicating asylum-claims, has issued a notice stating that it expects the Ontario government's cuts will result in "longer hearings, more postponements and adjournments and more missed deadlines on the part of unrepresented individuals." The IRB stated it has already been coping with a significant case backlog due to the surge in refugee claimants to Canada during the last two years.

Workers from Parkdale Community Legal Services, which has served impoverished immigrants and tenants in Toronto's west end for decades and is now Canada's largest legal aid clinic, have said that the cuts are already having a significant impact. They warn that by June of next year 10 of the clinic's 22 staff will have to be let go, severely reducing the clinic's capacity to deliver services.

The Ford government's assault on legal aid is a part a broader austerity agenda that is targeting workers' social and democratic rights. Since coming to power in June 2018, the Conservatives have rolled back a planned minimum wage hike, gutted labour standards, eliminated hundreds of millions of dollars from school and university budgets, and announced increases in public school class sizes that will result in the loss of more than ten thousand teaching jobs. Devastating blows have also fallen on the health care system and other social services, as Ford's Progressive Conservatives seek to make Ontario "open for business," boosting profits for the corporate elite through the stepped-up exploitation of the working class.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his federal Liberal government are cynically portraying themselves as a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives ahead of next month's federal election. Hoping to exploit mass opposition to Ford, the prime minister has spent more time attacking the Ontario premier than federal Conservative leader Andrew Scheer.

Trudeau responded to the Ford government's legal aid cuts with a \$26 million one-off cash injection to Legal Aid Ontario, which will allow it to temporarily restore immigration and refugee services until the end of the current fiscal year. Trudeau blustered that it "is really frustrating for me and I think for all Canadians" that "the government of Doug Ford ... is walking away from services to the most vulnerable."

The attempt of Trudeau and his Liberals to posture as defenders of refugees is absurd on its face. It stands in direct contradiction with the reactionary refugee and immigration policies they have implemented, and which are aligned and coordinated ever-more closely with the xenophobic and anti-immigrant Trump administration.

Under the direction of Trudeau's Liberals, Canada's immigration authorities have sent thousands of impoverished Caribbean, Latin American and African refugees back to their home countries, including many who fled to Canada in the false belief that Ottawa would offer them protection from Trump's fascistic squads of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol officers.

This spring, the Liberal government passed an

omnibus budget bill that included an additional \$1 billion for US-Canada border security over the next five years; and measures to prevent asylum-seekers who enter the country "irregularly" from making refugee claims in Canada, if they have made similar claims in certain other countries, including the United States. The latter change essentially strips human-rights protections from vulnerable asylum-seekers.

As the widespread protests in defence of Ontario's legal aid system attest, the policies of capitalist austerity and war embraced by the entire political establishment are fueling mounting working-class opposition. Growing numbers of young people and workers are looking for a way to resist the ruling elite's right-wing agenda.

In early April, well over 100,000 high school students walked out at schools to protest attacks on public education. Just a few days later, more than 10,000 teachers, students, parents, and their supporters rallied outside the Ontario legislature in Toronto. Later in the month, thousands attended a rally to oppose Ford's plundering of the provincial health care system.

While Ford presses forward with the increasingly open and vocal support of big business, the unions are doing their best to contain and suppress working class opposition through sporadic and anemic protests. They are attempting to fraudulently frame workers' struggles in Ontario as the result of the individual machinations of a particularly reactionary multi-millionaire businessman, in order to prevent any broader challenge to the capitalist elite, for which he is but a figurehead.

The reality is that the union bureaucrats are terrified of the eruption of a mass working-class challenge to austerity, which would rapidly escape their control, serving as a catalyst for struggles across Canada and beyond, and have the potential to become a direct challenge to capitalist rule.



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