

As the federal election campaign concludes

Canadian workers must prepare for convulsive struggles

Keith Jones
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Whatever the outcome of today's Canadian federal election, workers and young people will soon be thrust into convulsive social and political struggles.

According to the opinion polls, for the first time ever, neither of big business's traditional parties of national government—the Liberals or the Conservatives—commands the support of even a third of the electorate.

The vagaries of the first-past-the-post electoral system may still enable the ruling Liberals, led by Justin Trudeau, or Andrew Scheer and his Conservatives, to scrape through with a parliamentary majority.

But whether the Liberals or Conservatives secure a majority or—as now appears far more probable—Canada is ruled by a Liberal-led alliance involving the New Democratic Party (NDP) and potentially the Greens, or by a minority Conservative government propped up by the Bloc Québécois, the next government will intensify the ruling-class assault on the social position of the working class at home, and pursue aggression and war on the world stage.

The actions of the incoming government will be determined not by the bogus promises made on the campaign trail, but by the systemic crisis of world capitalism. Locked in a desperate struggle for markets, profits, and strategic advantage and facing mounting social opposition from an increasingly militant working class, capitalist ruling elites around the world are turning to reaction, war, authoritarian methods of rule, and the cultivation of the far-right.

Canada's ruling class, which historically has fed at the banquet table of first British and then US imperialism and was a major belligerent in both of the imperialist world wars of the last century, is no different. Already over the course of the past 18 months, it has propelled to power in three of the country's four most populous provinces—Ontario, Quebec and Alberta—governments led by right-wing populists that are gutting public services and workers' rights.

Meanwhile, the Trudeau Liberal government has lurched ever further to the right. Just in the last year, it slashed corporate taxes once again, criminalized a postal workers' strike, attacked the rights of refugees, expanded the power and reach of the national security apparatus, and gave full-throated support to the abortive "Made in USA" coup against Venezuela's elected government.

All-party conspiracy of silence on war and the turn to authoritarianism

The election campaign now staggering to its conclusion has been distinguished by its parochial, debased and above all fraudulent character.

Excluded from the official campaign has been any substantive discussion of the critical issues confronting working people—mounting economic insecurity and social inequality, the assault on democratic rights, rearmament and the threat of war.

The ruling class dares not openly discuss its right-wing agenda, because it knows that it would provoke mass working-class opposition.

In a silence that bespeaks consent, none of the parties has made an issue of the Trudeau government's plans to spend tens of billions of dollars on buying new fleets of battleships and warplanes, and to hike military spending by more than 70 percent by 2026. Similarly, discussion of Canada's ever deepening integration into Washington's military-strategic offensives against China and Russia, and in the oil-rich Middle East—any of which could ignite a global conflagration—has effectively been censored by all-party agreement.

Similarly, blacked out from the campaign debate has been discussion of the ever-widening assault on democratic rights. This includes: the systematic criminalization of workers' struggles through federal and provincial anti-strike laws; the empowering of the Canadian Security Intelligence Agency (CSIS) to break virtually any law to disrupt purported "national security" threats; the intelligence agencies' arrogation of the right to spy on Canadians' electronic communications; and the "normalization" of governments' use of the antidemocratic "notwithstanding clause."

Bill 21, the chauvinist law targeting religious minorities that Quebec's CAQ government adopted in June, did feature in the election campaign, but only because Quebec Premier François Legault made it an issue. Faced with Legault's demand that they pledge not to challenge Bill 21's constitutionality in the courts, all of the party leaders, including the NDP's Jagmeet Singh, prostrated themselves.

NDP and trade unions plot right-wing coalition with big business Liberals

As the campaign limped to its finish, Trudeau amplified his claims that electing a "progressive" Liberal-led government is the only way to prevent the coming to power of a Conservative government, akin to that of Ontario's hated right-wing populist premier Doug Ford, that will dramatically slash social spending.

This is an old ruse. Time and again, the Liberals, the ruling class's preferred party of government for most of the past century, have railed against the policy prescriptions of the Conservatives (and in the 1990s and 2000s the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance) only to repackage and

implement them once the votes are counted.

To cite but one example, it was the Chretien-Martin Liberal government, elected on the basis of denunciations of the Conservatives' "fixation" with the deficit, that implemented the biggest social spending cuts and the largest tax cuts for big business and the rich in Canadian history.

The corporate media and trade union bureaucrats have made much of the fact that the Trudeau government, in accordance with IMF recommendations, has incurred budget deficits. But this is far less than meets the eye. Behind a smokescreen of "progressive" rhetoric—the promotion of gender and ethnic-racial identity politics and phony declamations of concern about the growth of social inequality—the Trudeau government has enforced the reactionary fiscal framework fashioned by successive Liberal and Conservative governments in the preceding three decades: ultra-low taxes for big business and the rich, and rationed public and social services. This includes cutting tens of billions from health care spending.

Moreover, Trudeau's closest provincial allies, the Philippe Couillard-led Quebec Liberal government and Kathleen Wynne's Ontario Liberal government, implemented sweeping social spending cuts.

The polls suggest the social democrats of the NDP have avoided yet another election rout, by making a left feint. Singh and his New Democrats have made a calibrated and highly calculated appeal to the socioeconomic grievances of workers and youth, with promises of a national pharmacare program, relief for students drowning in debt, modest taxes for big business and the super-rich, and denunciations of the Liberals and Conservatives for "rigging" the economy to the favour of their corporate friends.

All of this is a fraud, no less brazen than Trudeau's claims to "stand up for working people." Not only are the timid reforms advocated by the NDP woefully inadequate to meet the social crisis confronting working people. The NDP has no intention of fighting for them.

No sooner did it become apparent that support was bleeding from the Canadian ruling class's parties of government, than the social democrats made clear their intention to prop up a pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal-led government, if parliamentary arithmetic permits. Toward that end, Singh has already announced six "key priorities," including such minimalist demands as lower cellphone fees, that he wants Trudeau to consider, when negotiating a Liberal-NDP governmental alliance. Conveniently, most of Singh's "priorities" overlap with Liberal promises.

Further highlighting the social democrats' readiness to work as the junior partners of the big-business Liberals, Singh has repeatedly proclaimed the NDP's willingness to enter a Liberal-led coalition government.

Both factions of the trade union bureaucracy—that led by Unifor, the country's largest industrial union, which has openly stumped for Trudeau's re-election under the "Anybody but Conservative" banner, and that which is pursuing the unions' traditional policy of backing the NDP electorally—are eagerly anticipating an NDP-backed Liberal-led government.

The union bureaucrats hope that with the NDP having a say in formulating governmental policy, they will be able to further expand their corporatist relations with big business and the state.

For decades, the pro-capitalist unions have imposed job and wage cuts and other concessions, sabotaged mass struggle against austerity like the anti-Harris mass movement of the 1990s or the 2012 Quebec student strike, and policed the antistrike laws passed by governments of every stripe, from the Conservatives and Parti Quebecois to the Liberals and NDP.

The hostility of both the pro-Liberal and pro-NDP wings of the union bureaucracy to the working class has been highlighted during the course of the election campaign itself. Unifor has not raised a finger to mobilize Canadian autoworkers in support of the striking US GM workers, just as it

has smothered all job action against GM's impending closure of the Oshawa GM plant and systematically pitted Canadian workers against their US and Mexican brother and sisters.

Earlier this month, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), among the most prominent of the pro-NDP unions, bowed to the demands of the Ontario Conservative government and agreed to real-terms wage and benefit cuts for 55,000 school support staff. The CUPE school support-staff agreement paves the way for the right-wing populist Ford government to impose the same wage-cutting terms on over 1 million public sector workers across the province. Moreover, it splits the province's education workers, facilitating the government's drive to dramatically increase class sizes and eliminate 10,000 teaching jobs.

Workers must take these events as a serious warning. A trade union-backed Liberal-NDP government—whether in the form of a coalition ministry, a "confidence and supply accord," or a more informal agreement—would be no less beholden to big business and hostile to the interests of the working class than a Conservative government.

Like the current Liberal government, a Liberal-NDP governmental alliance would use identity politics, hollow progressive rhetoric including about the urgency of tackling climate change, and an enhanced corporatist partnership with the unions as a smokescreen for pursuing the agenda of the bourgeoisie: rearmament; the aggressive assertion of Canadian imperialist interests around the world; and a never-ending assault on the social position and rights of the working class.

The Conservative campaign and the far-right

Despite the Trudeau government's record of austerity, rearmament and a still closer military-security alliance with Washington, a powerful faction of the ruling class has soured on the Liberal government and is pushing for an avowedly right-wing Conservative government under the social conservative Andrew Scheer.

The Conservatives have pledged to make tens of billions in spending cuts, further reduce corporate taxes and regulatory restraints on capital, shamelessly promote the interests of Big Oil, be even more supportive of the US war drive against China and integrate Canada into the US ballistic missile shield.

While lying is nothing new in bourgeois politics, the Conservative election campaign, which was replete with intrigues, provocations and dirty tricks, had a decidedly antidemocratic character.

The corporate media and Scheer used the Trudeau "blackface" pseudo-scandal not just to discredit the Liberal leader. They also seized on it to downplay and trivialize the very real links between the Conservatives and far-right forces, such as Rebel Media. During the campaign itself, the Conservatives colluded with Rebel Media in seeking to mount a #MeToo attack against Trudeau, which in the end did not go beyond the planting of salacious rumours for want of even the flimsiest of evidence.

In the dying days of the campaign, Scheer openly challenged a core principle of Canada's parliamentary democracy, with the aim of laying the groundwork for a Conservative grab for power. Scheer repeatedly asserted that the party that wins the most seats—not the party that can command a majority of the elected members of parliaments—has the "right" to form the government.

The Conservatives' hopes to form a minority government would appear to be dependent on the Bloc Quebecois (BQ). The BQ has mounted a Quebec chauvinist campaign, centering on its promotion of Bill 21 and support for the right-wing nationalist CAQ government.

The rightward shift of bourgeois politics in Canada and around the world does not enjoy broad-based popular support. On the contrary,

workers and young people in Canada as around the world are moving sharply left. From the strikes of teachers and autoworkers in the US, the Yellow Vest movement in France, and the mass antigovernment protests in Hong Kong and Algeria to the mass protests in Ontario against Ford, the working class is seeking to assert its independent class interests. Moreover, these struggles are increasingly developing outside of and in explicit opposition to the pro-capitalist unions and the establishment left parties that for decades have suppressed the class struggle.

The key question is to arm this incipient upsurge of the class struggle with a socialist-internationalist program and strategy and with revolutionary leadership.

To answer the ruling-class assault on working people's social and democratic rights and its plans to use them as cannon fodder in advancing Canadian imperialism's predatory interests on the world stage, the working class—English- and French-speaking, immigrant and First Nations—must constitute itself as an independent political force, fight for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of socioeconomic life, and unite their struggles with those of workers in the US and around the world.

The Socialist Equality Party is dedicated to leading the fight for this program in conjunction with our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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