

Toronto tenants protest against looming evictions amid COVID-19 crisis

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Tenants' organizations disrupted a speech by Toronto Mayor John Tory at a real estate development ribbon-cutting ceremony last week. The protest was part of an ongoing series of actions against a provincial law that will end a moratorium on evictions in Ontario, even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

The demonstrators demanded that Tory use his municipal emergency powers for health and safety enforcement to block evictions in the city and prevent police from participating in them. They also pressed the mayor to denounce the Doug Ford-led Ontario Conservative government's recently passed pro-landlord Bill 184. The protest against Tory and the provincial Conservative government was the latest action by tenants' groups, which previously mounted a demonstration at the provincial legislature and then marched to the mayor's \$2.4 million condo unit to present a mock eviction notice. Police used pepper spray to push back the protesters.

Passed last week by Ford's hard-right government, Bill 184 opens the way to restart tenant evictions on August 1, and guts protections for renters formerly embodied in landlord-tenant regulations.

Ford was forced to order a temporary suspension of evictions on March 17 as part of the province's COVID-19 lockdown. But five days before, his government had already signalled its intent to further skew landlord-tenant relations in favour of the former by introducing Bill 184 into the legislature. Even as the pandemic has ravaged the province, leading to more than 2,750 deaths, passage of Bill 184 has been a government priority.

The enactment of legislation rolling back tenants' rights foreshadows a coming onslaught against the working class by all levels of government, as the ruling class moves to eviscerate regulatory protections and slash public services, jobs and wages. Their goal is to make

workers pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars funnelled into the coffers of the banks and financial oligarchy by the federal Liberal government, the Bank of Canada and other state agencies since the onset of the pandemic.

To this end, Canada's ruling elite, spearheaded by the Trudeau Liberal government, is enforcing a reckless and criminal back-to-work drive that threatens the lives of tens of thousands of workers.

Ford's bill transforms the Landlord-Tenant Board (LTB), which adjudicates disputes, into little more than a debt-collection agency. Central to the new law, which the government cynically misnamed the Protecting Tenants and Strengthening Community Housing Act, is permission for landlords to obtain legally enforceable and onerous repayment agreements for rent and utility arrears without adjudication before the LTB.

A tenant may refuse such an agreement and appeal to the LTB. However, the resources and legal knowledge and expertise required for such an action are often unattainable for vulnerable tenants. The majority of those in arrears on their rent do not speak English as their first language, are poor or are recently unemployed. Should a tenant sign on to a repayment schedule and subsequently be unable to meet the stipulations demanded by their landlords, eviction orders can immediately be issued without a hearing before the LTB.

In another vindictive move, the Ford government applied the measures in Bill 184 retroactively to March, when the coronavirus lockdown was announced. Hundreds of thousands of Ontarians who lost their jobs or have suffered considerable loss of income due to the pandemic and its economic fallout could thus be targeted by landlords using their new expedited eviction powers.

Recent weeks have also seen protests against Bill 184 in other Ontario cities, including Ottawa and Hamilton. A participant in a recent Hamilton protest told the *World*

Socialist Web Site, “I know people who are living in apartments and month by month are fearful that they may be kicked out and end up on the streets. The shelters are full to overflowing, so they can’t go there. Despite registries that allegedly track scuzzy landlords and report them to government, they get off scot-free and simply do not carry out the maintenance they are expected to do. It’s absolutely shameful. Doug Ford basically has said ‘I don’t care about you tenants. I care about the landlords more and put their needs first.’”

Estimates suggest that Bill 184 will result in over 6,000 evictions from rental units across the province affecting about 15,000 individuals in the coming weeks. In April, rent delinquency rates in Toronto jumped to 10 percent of all tenants—a whopping increase from the average 1 percent rate prior to the pandemic. In April, about 53,000 rental units were in arrears in Toronto, encompassing at least 130,000 people who will now struggle to avoid eviction. These numbers are expected to swell once rent arrears figures for more recent months are tabulated.

Toronto already has an estimated homeless population of 9,000. That figure does not include thousands more precariously living on the couches and floors of friends and family or in their automobiles. As protests erupted against Bill 184, resistance also developed to evictions in the homeless camps in the city’s parks, ravines and underpasses. There are some 43 such encampments across the city.

On July 16, about 20 homeless people camped in Toronto’s Moss Park successfully resisted an eviction order from the municipality, and refused to vacate their makeshift shelters as police descended on the area. The eviction order was issued only 24 hours in advance, violating a bylaw that requires 72 hours’ notice be given. Homeless representatives subsequently filed a case in provincial court arguing that the city’s attacks on homeless camps are unconstitutional.

Homeless shelters are already at capacity in Toronto as the city scrambles to find additional spaces. However, many people living on the streets and in the parks are reluctant to move into shelters, where thefts, onerous and invasive curfews, and the threat of assault and getting infected with coronavirus are part of the daily reality. At least 630 COVID-19 cases have been recorded to date in the city’s shelters.

The sky-high rents in Toronto are the result of a frenzy of real estate speculation over the past 20 years that has enriched a handful of real estate moguls at the expense of renters. In contrast to the growing number of workers

struggling to keep afloat, Toronto is a pole of attraction for the super-rich from across the country and internationally. Condo units are bought as an investment or for cash laundering, and often held unoccupied or simply rented out for the seasonal tourist trade. The multi-millions possessed by Mayor Tory and Premier Ford are dwarfed by the wealth of the estimated 27 billionaires who make Toronto their home. Their numbers include David Thomson of the Thomson Reuters media empire, whose family, with a net worth of \$37 billion, is Canada’s richest.

The housing crisis is also the product of the systematic gutting of social housing by both the federal and Ontario governments and all political parties, including the trade union-aligned New Democratic Party (NDP). Going all the way back to the NDP government of Bob Rae in the early 1990s, provincial governments have provided zero funding for public housing, while gutting public spending for social services across the board. Successive governments have slashed corporate and personal income tax rates, and eviscerated labour market regulations, leading to a rapid growth in social inequality as millions of low-paid, precariously employed workers struggle to make ends meet.

Many of the mansions occasionally occupied by Toronto’s millionaires and billionaires overlook the recently demolished homeless encampments in the city’s forested ravines. There are plenty of resources to address the housing needs of the working class, but this requires a class conscious socialist movement aimed at expropriating the corporations and instituting a social and economic system that places people’s needs over the rapacious profit drive of the capitalist class.



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