Canada Conservatives rebrand themselves the better to pursue austerity and imperialist aggression

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If the opinion polls are correct, Justin Trudeau and his Liberals have bled support to both the Conservatives and Canada's social democrats, the NDP, in recent weeks, and will fall far short of winning a parliamentary majority in the September 20 federal election. Indeed, it increasingly appears that the Conservatives will win a plurality of both votes and seats. They could well displace the Liberals, who are currently polling around 32 percent support compared to the Tories' 34 percent, as Canada's government.

The corporate media has played a major role in boosting Conservative fortunes. It has touted Conservative leader Erin O'Toole as "a moderate," even "Red Tory," and promoted his claim that he heads a "different" and "open" Conservative Party.

This is a sham and a fraud.

O'Toole served as a cabinet minister in Stephen Harper's hard-right Conservative government and staunchly defends its record of austerity, militarism and reaction. Like their US Republican and British Tory allies, Canada's Conservatives have for decades shifted ever further right, and have served as incubators for far-right forces like the People's Party of O'Toole's onetime cabinet colleague Maxime Bernier.

O'Toole became party leader by pillorying his chief opponent, Harper's Defence and Foreign Minister, Peter McKay, as a closet liberal, and by courting the party's substantial anti-abortion, anti-gay religious right faction. In the thirteen months since, he has made four major changes to Conservative messaging and policy. He has repeatedly affirmed his support for abortion and LGBTQ rights; defied the express wishes of last spring's Conservative Party convention and elaborated a policy to "fight" manmade climate change; outlined a package of purported "pro-worker policies"; and, most recently, tempered the Conservatives' demand for a quick, post-pandemic pivot to austerity.

At the same time, he has doubled down on key right-wing Conservative policy prescriptions. Chief among them are ever more strident calls for Ottawa to adopt a more aggressive stance against China and Russia and strengthen Canada's role in NATO and NORAD; gut environmental and other barriers to resource development projects; and formulate and implement a plan to eliminate the annual federal budget deficit.

O'Toole's media-hyped repositioning of the Conservatives is transparently aimed at making the party more "electable" by appealing to sections of the middle class hitherto alienated by their pandering to the religious right and hostility to any serious measure to combat climate change. It is also aimed at solidifying big business support. Big capital wants pandemic relief programs for working people rapidly phased out. But fearing the potential for a rapid economic downturn, it is pressing for continued stimulus measures in the form of tax cuts, subsidies, and infrastructure spending. The Conservatives' new climate change policy is also meant to placate the powerful sections of big business who believe they have been too wedded to the interests of Big Oil and that Canadian capitalism must seek to become a global leader in the "green" industries of the future.

It is O'Toole's "pro-worker" agenda that above all demonstrates the true character of his repositioning of the Conservatives. Far from "moving to the centre," O'Toole and his Conservatives are using demagogy, lies, smoke and mirror promises, and calibrated appeals to the far right to bamboozle their way into office so they can intensify the assault on the working class at home and pursue imperialist aggression, in close concert with Washington, around the world.

In the naming of "defending" Canadian workers, O'Toole is calling for protectionist, economic nationalist policies. He specifically ties this to Canada's further integration into Washington's full-court diplomatic, economic, and military-strategic offensive against China.

When he first outlined this policy last September, O'Toole described it as a "Canada First" policy and readily admitted its affinity with the "America First" program of then US President Donald Trump. The Conservative leader subsequently stopped using the "Canada First" label just as he dropped the Trump-inspired "Take back Canada" slogan he used in winning the Conservative leadership—for fear it would draw attention to the extent of the support that there was, and no doubt still is, for the fascist-minded, failed coup-plotter Trump within Conservative ranks.

O'Toole's advisors claim the Conservatives' "pro-worker" policies are modelled after those of British Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Long a close ally of Trump, Johnson has made it his political mission to "complete" the social counter-revolution initiated under Margaret Thatcher. In keeping with this policy of maximizing profit extraction from the working class, Johnson has systematically sabotaged anti-COVID-19 measures, infamously telling his advisors as the pandemic raged, "No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!"

All sections of Canada's political establishment, beginning with the federal Liberal government and including the NDP, have prioritized profits over saving lives throughout the pandemic with catastrophic results. These include more than 27,000 official COVID-19 deaths and tens of thousands if not more stricken with Long COVID. Yet like Trump and Johnson, it is O'Toole and the federal Conservatives' closest provincial allies, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, Saskatchewan's Scott Moe, Ontario's Doug Ford and Quebec's François Legault, who have been the most vociferous advocates of eliminating all social distancing measures and letting the virus rip.

Last October, as Canada's second COVID-19 wave was rapidly developing, O'Toole went to Alberta to specifically praise Kenney's opposition to lockdown measures. He favourably contrasted Kenney's actions with those of Ontario Premier Doug Ford, who was then being

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chastised by the *Toronto Sun* and *National Post* for not fully implementing the homicidal "herd immunity" policy advocated in the so-called Great Barrington Declaration.

O'Toole and his Conservatives have cynically appealed to popular anger over Trudeau's reckless decision to call a snap election amid the country's Delta variant-driven fourth wave, while simultaneously appealing to far-right anti-vaxx sentiment. This has included opposing mandatory vaccination even for hospital and nursing home workers, and demonstratively refusing to order all Conservative candidates to get vaccinated or even revealing how many are refusing to do so. Grudgingly, O'Toole announced earlier this week that he would ensure the Health Minister in a Conservative government, that is the minister responsible for overseeing the procurement and rollout of vaccines, would be vaccinated!

In promoting the lie that the Conservatives have "changed," the media was quick to point to their platform commitment to increase health care transfers to the provinces by an additional $60 billion over the next 10 years. They also praised O'Toole for making improved mental health care one of the five priorities of his "Canada Recovery Plan," and for promising to introduce direct payments to parents via the tax system, in lieu of a Liberal commitment to develop a nationwide network of $10 per day early childcare facilities.

However, even before the election campaign is over these spending promises have proven to be largely smoke and mirrors. When the Conservatives released their "costed" platform on Wednesday, it emerged that over the next five years they plan to increase all federal health care spending, including transfers and funding for mental health care, by just $5.1 billion or $1 billion per annum. This under conditions where the pandemic has demonstrated that decades of cuts have ravaged Canada's health care system, and exacerbated the punishing work-loads and psychological stress endured by health care workers.

Similarly, in place of the Liberal plan, much lauded by sections of corporate Canada eager to see more women in the labour force, to spend upwards of $26 billion over the next five years on creating $10 a day child care, the Conservatives are proposing to spend just over $2 billion in tax credits.

The costed platform reveals that the Conservatives' budget priorities are corporate tax cuts, including a three-year $13.8 billion capital investment tax cut, a rapid end to pandemic relief, which they have castigated as a disincentive to work, and the provision of targeted wage-subsidies for industries like tourism that were especially hard-hit by the pandemic.

The Conservatives have also pledged to double the Canada Workers Benefit (CWB), which provides a tax credit to the lowest-paid workers, to a maximum of $2,400 per year for an individual working full time and making less than $24,573 per year. While workers condemned to live in poverty no doubt would welcome any increase to their income, the CWB constitutes a subsidy for low-wage employers and is based on the invidious Victorian distinction between the so-call "deserving" and "undeserving poor." Moreover, it is meant to legitimize the Conservatives' tax-cutting agenda, which has and will continue to massively favour the most privileged sections of society and big business.

To the initial consternation of sections of his own party, O'Toole's phoney "pro-worker agenda" includes a series of "pro-union" commitments, such as requiring large federally regulated companies to have "worker representation" on their boards of directors and giving unions greater say in Canadian trade disputes. This reflects an understanding on the part of O'Toole and his backers within the ruling elite that the unions firmly uphold the interests of Canadian capitalism by suppressing the class struggle.

These policies are aimed at further integrating the corporatist trade unions with big business and the state, and enjoy in their essential orientation widespread support within the ruling class. While corporate Canada has become increasingly critical of the Trudeau government for its supposed, to quote the *Globe and Mail's* Wednesday editorial, "drunken spending," it has repeatedly praised the government for fostering tripartite collaboration with the unions. The unions have been pivotal in both enforcing the ruling class' ruinous back-to-work/back-to-school policy and suppressing upsurges of militant working class struggles that have erupted across Canada over recent months.

To date, the major unions have eschewed O'Toole's overtures. However, this could easily change if the Conservatives form a government. The US unions, including major "International" unions with large Canadian memberships such as the United Steelworkers (USW) and United Ford and Commercial Workers (UFCW), collaborated closely with Trump and continue to echo his reactionary economic-nationalist "America First" rhetoric.

As part of their opposition to public and social services for working people across Canada, the Conservatives have long championed "provincial autonomy" and, although historically the party of Anglo-chauvinism, have often found common cause with the Quebec nationalists.

This continues under O'Toole. On Thursday, Quebec's CAQ "Quebec First" premier, François Legault, explicitly endorsed the election of a Conservative government. Among his stated reasons was that the Conservatives have guaranteed not to support a constitutional court challenge to Bill 21, a chauvinist Quebec law that discriminates against religious minorities, especially Muslim women.

The media's sympathetic coverage of the Conservative campaign underscores that powerful sections of the ruling class are considering a change of government to shift politics sharply further to the right. A major factor in this is their fear of growing social opposition in the working class and anger that Trudeau has not moved more aggressively against it, including by more forthrightly championing an end to all COVID-19 restrictions.

That the ruling class will prevail on the next government, whatever party leads it, to work to place the full burden of the pandemic's economic fallout on the working class was illustrated by a recent article by senior *Globe and Mail* business columnist Andrew Willis. It reported that Canada's CEOs are angered by the supposed "anti-business" tenor of the election campaign and the failure of their political representatives to champion a "growth agenda," i.e. a battery of measures to swell profits through intensified worker exploitation.

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