

Ontario unions hail NDP for putting “working people first”—Who do they think they are kidding?

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The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), which has a dues paying membership of over 1 million workers in Canada’s most populous province, has called for the election of a New Democratic Party (NDP) provincial government on June 2.

In a 45-second faux “uplifting” video, the OFL proclaims: “Working Ontarians are tired of Premier after Premier treating us like props instead of people. Whether it’s the Conservatives or the Liberals in power, it feels like things just get harder for all of us. Our health care is collapsing. We’re getting priced out of neighbourhoods. And our future feels more uncertain than ever. We’re through hoping for different results from the same choices. This election, Ontario’s working people will choose a government that puts us first. And the only candidates who have shown they’re truly in it for all of us are Andrea Horwath and the NDP.”

Who do the OFL bureaucrats think they are kidding? Even by the standards of the lies told and false promises made during bourgeois elections, this brief video is breathtakingly dishonest. The union bureaucrats who produced it chose to “forget” that the NDP has been deservedly unelectable in Ontario since the first and only ever NDP government in the province, that headed by Bob Rae from 1990-95, imposed savage austerity and attacks on workers’ rights. Implemented at the behest of the Bay Street financial elite, the Rae NDP government’s anti-worker policies paved the way for the coming to power of Conservative Premier Mike Harris and his Thatcherite “Common Sense Revolution.”

The OFL leaders also ignore that the federal NDP is currently in a governmental alliance with the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau. The NDP has pledged to prop up the minority Trudeau government for the next three years, as it plays a leading role in NATO’s war against Russia, funneling hundreds of millions worth of weaponry to Ukraine, pivots to imposing “post-pandemic” austerity, and presides over major inflation-driven cuts to workers’ real incomes.

The likes of OFL President and former teachers’ union bureaucrat Patty Coates, CUPE Ontario President Fred Hahn, and United Steelworker District 6 head Myles Sullivan also ignore—or rather would have us forget—that for 15 years, from 2003 to 2018, Ontario’s unions closely collaborated with provincial Liberal governments that left in place the key tenets of the “Common Sense Revolution”; then, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, implemented wave after wave of further austerity measures, while slashing corporates taxes.

What is the NDP’s record on austerity and attacking workers’ rights?

When the New Democrats held power in Ontario in the first half of the 1990s, Premier Rae declared that there was “no alternative” to implementing social spending cuts and replacing welfare with “workfare.” The NDP cut provincial funding for social housing to zero, slashed student aid, and enforced its notorious “social contract,” under which public sector workers were forced to take unpaid leave (“Rae Days”) and jobs were slashed.

These attacks set the stage for Harris, whose government cut welfare rates by 20 percent; slashed taxes for big business and the rich, while claiming budget deficits required the wholesale gutting of public services; shredded environmental regulations; and loosened work rules to normalize 50- and 60-hour work weeks.

The NDP claims to defend workers’ rights, but it has repeatedly been complicit in attacking them. In the spring of 2011, the Dalton McGuinty Liberal government stripped Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) workers of the right to strike by designating the TTC an essential service. The NDP and provincial labour leaders, including OFL affiliate ATU Local 113 which represents TTC workers, offered no resistance to this attack. Andrea Horwath limited her criticism to the unseemly speed with which the Liberals “rammed through” the essential service legislation.

In the provincial election held later that year, the Liberal government was reduced to minority status in the Ontario Legislature. With the OFL’s support, Andrea Horwath and the NDP happily propped up the government, ensuring the Liberals had a parliamentary majority for spending cuts and attacks on workers for the next two and a half years—that is, until Premier Kathleen Wynne decided to call an election.

The first NDP-endorsed Liberal budget, adopted in April 2012, promised \$14 billion in cuts over the next three years, including to child welfare, early learning and mental health programs. At the time, it was predicted that the cuts would result in 105,000 workers losing their jobs and 8,000 more hospital beds being eliminated.

The budget’s centerpiece was a two-year wage freeze for 1.2 million provincial public sector workers, including civil servants, teachers, nurses, hospital workers and municipal employees. The unions—including the OFL-affiliated Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)—bowed to the government’s wage freeze. When teachers

rebelled and the government imposed wage-cutting contracts on them via legislation (Bill 115), the NDP, without a murmur of dissent from the OFL and its affiliates, continued to prop up the Liberal government.

What is the NDP's record on "putting working people first" during the pandemic?

The NDP has been complicit in the ruling elite's "profits before life" pandemic policy, which has officially claimed over 40,000 lives. In British Columbia, where the party forms the government, it refused to recommend the use of high-quality masks, denied that COVID-19 spreads through the air, and kept key industries operating throughout the pandemic.

The federal New Democrats ensured that Trudeau's minority government had a parliamentary majority throughout the pandemic. This allowed the Liberals to transfer over \$650 billion to the banks and financial markets in March 2020, adopt the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, which acted as a slush fund for corporate executives by handing over tens of billions of dollars to profitable companies ostensibly to pay workers' wages, and impose the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, a poverty-level subsidy that all but forced working people to return to unsafe workplaces as soon as lockdowns were lifted.

The NDP also fully endorsed the Liberals' reckless back-to-work/back-to-school drive, which led to one wave of infections after another. This homicidal profits-before-lives policy culminated in governments across the country, greenlighted by Ottawa, implementing the far-right Freedom Convoy's demand that all remaining COVID-19 public health measures be rescinded, even as Omicron ran rampant.

What is the NDP's record on militarism and war?

While working people in Ontario and across Canada struggle to make ends meet with rampant inflation, the NDP and their Liberal allies are spending tens of billions of dollars on weaponry for imperialist conquest. The NDP's support for successive Liberal budgets in the House of Commons has included backing the 73 percent 10-year military spending hike first unveiled by the Liberals in 2017. The latest federal budget added an additional \$8 billion to this spending plan, including funds to modernize Canada's defence infrastructure (NORAD) so it can wage nuclear war with its US ally.

The NDP fully supports the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. The NDP introduced a motion accusing Russia of genocide, which won unanimous support in the House of Commons, and supports the Trudeau government sending lethal weaponry to Kiev to fuel the conflict. The vast sums of money for death and destruction will be squeezed out of the working class through social spending cuts and attacks on working conditions, which the NDP's union allies will do all they can to enforce.

How the OFL suppresses the class struggle

The OFL's full-throated support for the pro-austerity, pro-war NDP is the appropriate political decision for an organization that specializes in sabotaging workers' struggles. Throughout the pandemic, OFL member unions have forced teachers to work in unsafe schools, manufacturing workers and food packaging workers to labour in COVID-infected plants, and health care workers to suffer in desperately overwhelmed hospitals. Whenever workers pushed to fight collectively against the ruling elite's refusal to protect them from the potentially deadly virus, union bureaucrats told them their struggles were illegal and shut them down.

The OFL states, "Since Doug Ford was elected in 2018, the OFL has tracked his Conservative government's decisions through the OFL's Ford Tracker. The tracker has almost 700 items detailing spending cuts and rollbacks of workers' rights."

This is an unintentional self-indictment. Other than counting the cuts, what has the OFL done to combat these attacks? The answer is nothing. In fact, OFL-affiliated unions have prevented every struggle that has developed from turning into a political confrontation with the Ford government and accepted Ford's illegitimate Bill 124 by signing contracts for over 1 million public sector workers with annual wage caps of 1 percent.

Ontario is in the middle of an election campaign with thousands of workers across the province on strike for decent wages and working conditions. The response of the OFL is to tell workers that the only course of action available is to cast a ballot for the pro-capitalist NDP.

Workers across Ontario should repudiate the OFL's absurd claims an NDP government will put workers "first" with the contempt they deserve. The strikes and protests already erupting for wage increases, improved working conditions, and strong public services underscore that the working class is determined to assert its class interests. But workers will only be able to reverse the decades of rollbacks, counter the impact of inflation, oppose the reckless drive to world war, and end the pandemic if their struggles are united. Moreover, they must be infused with a socialist and internationalist program aimed at mobilizing the working class in political struggle to break the grip of the financial oligarchy over all aspects of society. The only party that fights for this in Canada and around the world is the Socialist Equality Party. Working people should join and build it.



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