

Ford and his Conservatives win Ontario election amid collapse in support for all establishment parties

Roger Jordan
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Ontario's hard-right Premier Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservatives (PC) won Thursday's general election in Canada's most populous province by default.

What above all characterized the election was popular disgust with, and alienation from, the entire political establishment.

Electoral participation collapsed, as the percentage of Ontarians who voted fell by a quarter, tumbling from 57 percent in 2018 to an historic low of 43.5 percent.

Ford increased his parliamentary majority from 76 to 83, even as his party lost hundreds of thousands of votes.

Ford's ability to romp to an electoral victory after four years of imposing ruthless austerity, attacks on worker rights and a pandemic policy of mass infection and death is a devastating indictment of the New Democrat (NDP) and Liberal opposition parties and, above all, the trade union bureaucracy.

The first year and eight months of Ford's mandate, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, were characterized by growing social opposition, raising the imminent prospect of a head-on clash between the working class and the right-wing populist Ford and his class-war government. But the unions, both then and subsequently during the pandemic, systematically suppressed all workers' struggles. They claimed that the answer to Ford's attacks was not the mobilization of the working class in industrial and political struggle, but the election of a "progressive government" on June 2, 2022. The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) even had a countdown clock atop its homepage that supposedly measured the days, hours, minutes and seconds to the election of a right-wing Liberal or NDP-led "progressive government."

This policy has strengthened the hand of Ford and the ruling class as a whole, as exemplified by Thursday's election result.

The official opposition New Democrats suffered an electoral debacle. They captured 31 seats, down from the 40 that they won in 2018. The social-democrats lost long-held, predominantly working class seats to the Conservatives, frequently in areas where the Tories have traditionally been also-rans. The NDP lost the northern Ontario seat of Timmins, which it had held for over three decades, a seat in the industrial city of Hamilton, and two of three seats it held in Windsor, the centre of Canada's auto industry.

Even more striking was the collapse in the NDP vote in both percentage and real terms. The NDP's share of the popular vote fell by 10 percentage points, from 33 percent last election to just 23 percent in 2022.

The total number of NDP votes nosedived from 1.92 million in 2018

to only 1.11 million on Thursday—a 40 percent decline.

While the NDP suffered the steepest collapse in popular support, the real story of Thursday's election was the popular repudiation of all three mainline parties.

Turnout plunged dramatically, expressing the lack of confidence broad sections of workers have in the entire political establishment and their phony electoral promises. Under conditions of war against Russia, runaway inflation, a raging pandemic, and constant attacks on workers and public spending, Canada's sclerotic political system proved to be totally impervious to the concerns of working people.

With the aim of intimidating working people, the media is trying to present Thursday's election result as a thumping endorsement of Ford and his Progressive Conservative government. But the Tories' 40.8 percent share of the votes cast by the 43.5 percent of the electorate that went to the polls means they in reality rallied the support of less than one in five potential voters (17.5 percent).

The Tories' total vote of 1.91 million fell below that which the NDP garnered in 2018, when it secured 1.92 million votes and finished a distant second.

The Ontario Liberals also suffered a rout Thursday, winning just eight seats in the 124-member provincial legislature. This was a gain of one from their historic 2018 defeat when they were driven from power after 15 years of implementing social-spending austerity and tax cuts for big business and the rich. As in 2018, the Liberals fell short of even obtaining official party status in the legislature, and party leader Stephen Del Duca failed to recapture the Toronto-area seat he lost four years ago. While the Liberal vote increased in percentage terms, surpassing that of the NDP by a fraction of a percentage point, its total vote is on par with what it received in 2018 in its worst ever electoral drubbing.

Within little more than two hours of the polls closing, both Del Duca and Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath announced they were resigning as their respective party's leaders.

The Ontario election result is a stinging rebuke to the "progressive" alliance between the trade unions, the NDP and the Liberals. It comes just two months after this alliance was formalized as never before at the federal level, through a union-backed "confidence-and-supply" agreement between Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals and the NDP. Touted as a means of "delivering" progress for Canadians and providing "political stability" in turbulent times, the agreement is in fact a commitment from the NDP and the union bureaucracy to prop up the minority Trudeau government till June 2025, as it wages war against Russia, massively increases military spending, imposes "post-

pandemic” austerity and presides over inflation-driven cuts in workers’ real wages.

The re-elected Ford government will encounter an increasingly radicalized working class

Thursday’s election was held amid a dramatic upsurge of the class struggle across Canada. Driven by rampant inflation and decades of wage stagnation presided over by the unions, workers at CP Rail, public sector workers in New Brunswick, and others have waged determined struggles over recent months. Forty thousand Ontario construction workers walked off the job amid the election campaign to demand wage increases that kept pace with inflation and improvements to workplace safety. The major construction unions, including the Labourers Industrial Union of North America and International Union of Operating Engineers, ensured that the strikers remained isolated on the picket line and made clear their hostility to the workers’ demands by campaigning for a vote for Ford’s Tories.

The NDP and their union backers proved utterly incapable of making any genuine appeal to the seething popular anger among working people. This is because these organizations have abandoned any association with the defence of working people’s interests over the past four decades, and spent the past four years smothering opposition to Ford’s anti-worker program. This is increasingly recognized by masses of working people as shown by the NDP’s inability to make any gains against the widely despised PCs and the party’s losses in its traditional heartlands of northern and southwestern Ontario.

The transformation of the unions and NDP into advocates of austerity for workers and key allies of the pro-war Liberals enabled the hard-right, millionaire businessman and erstwhile Trump enthusiast Ford to fraudulently pose as a “man of the people” and spokesman for “average Joes.” Speaking at his victory celebration Thursday night, Ford declared, “If you’re a miner in the north who’s out of work, I want you to know we’re building that road to the Ring of Fire. If you had to worry about your job at the local auto plant, I want you to know we’re investing in the future of Ontario’s auto sector. If you’re a student who wants to work in the tech sector, we will have a job waiting for you.”

This is all hogwash. One of Ford’s first actions after assuming power in 2018 was to criminalize a strike by low-paid graduate student teaching assistants at York University. During his first term in office, he imposed a three-year 1 percent per annum wage cap on over 1 million public sector workers, eliminated 10,000 teaching positions through budget cuts, and gutted labour standards and financial aid for post-secondary students. Working closely with the federal Trudeau government and Unifor, Ford provided hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies to the Detroit Three automakers to help these highly profitable companies pay for the transition to electric vehicle production, which has included the elimination of thousands of jobs at GM’s Oshawa plant and the Stellantis facility in Windsor. He invoked the anti-democratic “notwithstanding clause” to ram through changes to electoral funding.

But the Ford government’s hostility to working people was above all epitomized by its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the lead of the Trudeau Liberals, Ford implemented a “profits before

life” policy based on safeguarding corporate interests at the expense of the safety and very lives of working people. Businesses in manufacturing, construction, auto and other sectors were declared “essential” by Ford so that they could be excluded from any lockdowns, forcing workers to labour in dangerous conditions throughout the pandemic. With the unions’ support, Ford compelled teachers to return to the classroom with virtually no protections, helping fuel wave after wave of deadly infections.

These policies have officially claimed the lives of over 13,200 Ontarians. His government’s decision to gut the provincial inspection regime for long-term care facilities in late 2018 proved deadly, as thousands of elderly residents succumbed to COVID-19 in horrific conditions in understaffed and under-resourced homes.

Ford’s evolution from a Trump wannabe in 2018 to a figure now touted by the corporate media as a “mellowed and matured” leader speaks to the sharp shift to the right that has taken place within official Canadian politics over the past four years. Ford’s ability to advance the interests of Ontario big business and the Toronto-based financial oligarchy prompted a significant shift in how key sections of Canada’s ruling elite view him. Trudeau developed a close working relationship with Ford, including on pandemic policy and trade talks with the United States. The *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece of the Bay Street elite, headlined its post-election editorial, “The Doug Ford of 2018 could never have won an election in 2022. But he changed.”

What in fact “changed” was the rallying of much of the traditionally small-L liberal section of the ruling class, together with important sections of the privileged middle class, behind Ford’s agenda of ruthless austerity and attacks on workers’ and democratic rights. This includes a minority faction within the union bureaucracy, consisting principally of trade unions in the construction sector, that explicitly campaigned for Ford’s reelection.

The coming months and years will pitch workers across Ontario into a direct conflict with Ford and his PCs, who are pledged to intensify their regime of low corporate taxes and public spending austerity. Notwithstanding the Tories’ healthy parliamentary majority, the incoming Ontario government will be a crisis-ridden regime, struggling to impose its pro-corporate agenda against an ever-more radicalized working class that is beginning to break free of the political straitjacket imposed upon it for the past four decades by the trade unions and NDP. Everything will depend on the development of a socialist leadership to guide the coming struggles of the working class, which poses with renewed urgency the construction of the Socialist Equality Party as the mass socialist party of the working class.



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