

Trade unions offer to work with Ford and his Tories after debacle in Ontario election

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The results of Ontario's June 2 provincial election are a devastating indictment of the politics of the trade unions. Over the past four years, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), its various affiliates—including the United Steelworkers, CUPE, OPSEU, and the teachers' unions—and Unifor systematically suppressed all opposition among workers to the vicious attacks launched by Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government. They claimed that everything should be subordinated to the election of a "progressive government," i.e., a pro-austerity regime headed by the New Democrats or Liberals, in June 2022.

Working people showed what they thought of the unions' lying claim that the right-wing, pro-war and pro-austerity NDP and Liberals are friends of progress by voting with their feet. They stayed away from the polls in droves, producing a plunge in voter turnout from 57 percent in 2018 to an all-time Ontario-low of 43.5 percent in 2022. The NDP lost over 800,000 votes, around 40 percent of its 2018 total. Even the "victor" Ford and his Progressive Conservatives lost hundreds of thousands of votes, ending up with fewer votes than the NDP got in 2018 when they came a distant second. The Premier's party received the support of just 17.75 percent of the Ontario electorate.

The pathetic collapse of the trade unions' bogus campaign for a "progressive government" is the deserved outcome of their repeated efforts to sabotage every significant struggle waged by workers over the past four years. When the Trump-wannabe Ford came to power in 2018 it provoked widespread anger among working people. The determination to fight only intensified as Ford gutted education budgets, including by eliminating 10,000 teaching jobs, and imposed a three-year 1 percent per annum wage cap on over a million public sector workers with his Bill 124. As growing numbers of workers demanded strikes and other forms of protest, conditions were extremely favourable for the development of a worker-led political struggle against Ford and the entire ruling-class austerity agenda.

But it was precisely such a development that the trade unions wanted to avoid at all costs. From the strike by 200,000 teachers in February 2020 to the contract fight at the Detroit Three's auto plants later that same year and the attempts by hundreds of thousands of workers over the past two years to secure safe working conditions during the pandemic, the unions ensured that all struggles were isolated, smothered, and sold out. Their perspective was summed up by the countdown clock on the OFL's homepage noting the days, hours, minutes and even seconds Ontario workers had to wait until they would have the privilege of voting for a "progressive" government.

The unions' support for a "progressive" government was based on

their experiences during 15 years of Ontario Liberal rule, when the Liberals, with the NDP's explicit parliamentary support for close to three years from 2011 to 2014, cooperated closely with the unions in imposing austerity and a globally "competitive" tax regime for big business.

It was also based and built upon the unions' ever-expanding ties with the federal Liberals, exemplified by "strategic voting" campaigns dating back to 2004 and the abortive attempt to form a Liberal-led Liberal-NDP coalition government in 2008 pledged to massive corporate tax cuts, "fiscal responsibility," and waging war in Afghanistan. Since the election of the Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government in 2015, the unions have further deepened their alliance with the Liberals. They were staunch government allies in the renegotiation of NAFTA, backed Trudeau's massive bailout of the financial markets and big business when the pandemic first hit, and ensured that workers were forced back into dangerous workplaces amid successive waves of mass infection and death by spearheading the ruling elite's back-to-work/back-to-school campaign. A key ally of Trudeau in the reopening drive was none other than Doug Ford.

The culmination of the union/Liberal/NDP alliance was the conclusion in March of a "confidence and supply" agreement between the federal Liberals and NDP. With the full-throated support of their trade union allies, the social-democrats have pledged, in the name of providing "stability" and "progress," to keep Trudeau in power through June 2025. The agreement is based on waging war with Russia, raising military spending by tens of billions, and enforcing "post-pandemic" austerity to keep Canadian capitalism "competitive." It is a measure of the hostility among broad sections of the population to the entire political establishment that all parties involved in the March deal—the unions, NDP, and Liberals, who failed to even win official status in the legislature—suffered a debacle in the Ontario elections.

Unions reach out to Ford

Sections of the union bureaucracy appear to have been taken aback by the extent of the rank-and-file disaffection, and the gulf the election results revealed between the aspirations of the well-paid bureaucrats for lucrative sinecures on corporatist business-union-government committees and task forces, and those of the workers they claim to represent. One week after polling day, the Ontario Federation of Labour continues forlornly to display on its opening page its

countdown clock to the election of a “progressive government.” Only now the timer shows minus hours!

But a much more politically significant phenomenon is the rush of union bureaucrats declaring more or less openly their readiness to collaborate with Ford and his PCs to enforce austerity.

In a statement published June 3, OFL President Patty Coates said that “Ford spent his election campaign touting support for workers. If Ford’s Conservatives truly want to work for workers, their first action will be the immediate repeal of Bill 124.”

What Coates is getting at is the union bureaucracy’s frustration at being excluded from the process of determining how to impose attacks on public sector workers. Bill 124 decrees that annual pay increases must be limited to 1 percent. Coates is saying that if Ford repeals this measure—which by now has largely fulfilled its objective of imposing years of real wage cuts—the unions will be more than willing to negotiate the cuts demanded by big business and impose them on working people in a process with the Orwellian title of “collective bargaining.” This will not see Ford “work for workers,” but working with the union bureaucrats.

Proving this point, Coates’ statement begging Ford to accept the unions’ services came the same day that the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) appealed to the reelected Ford to promptly conclude a contract for the 55,000 education support workers represented by the union so as to avoid “disruption” when the current contract expires at the end of the summer. By “disruption,” the CUPE bureaucrats mean what for them would be the terrifying prospect of education support workers and over 200,000 teachers fighting together for improved wages and conditions. Instead, CUPE proposes that each section of workers, carefully split up and isolated by the unions, goes on bended-knee before Ford and begs his government for a contract. This was how CUPE behaved in 2019, negotiating an eleventh-hour sellout contract to block a strike by education support workers. The deal included the 1 percent wage cap, which CUPE accepted without a fight even though Bill 124 was not formally in place at the time.

Similar sentiments were expressed by the union brass at Unifor, Canada’s largest private sector union. Commenting on Ford’s election, Unifor Ontario Regional Director Naureen Rizvi said, “I hope that with this new mandate, Ford takes the opportunity to reverse his former attacks on workers, repeal Bill 124, invest in public health care and address the rising costs of living for Ontario workers.”

In other words, having blustered for four years about the need to “fight” for a “progressive” government while suppressing all workers’ struggles, Canada’s largest private sector union tells workers to pray for a modern-day conversion of Saul into Paul so that union bureaucrats and Thatcherite government ministers can get around the “bargaining table.”

Unifor has already laid the groundwork to cooperate closely with Ford. Last November, prior to being disgraced in a corruption scandal, Unifor President Jerry Dias appeared alongside the PC Premier and Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) president Warren “Smoky” Thomas to tout Ford’s increase of the provincial minimum wage to a measly \$15 per hour. Oblivious to the fact that a living wage in the province’s largest urban centres is at least \$20 and rapidly increasing due to the soaring cost of living, the Unifor bureaucrats provided the backdrop of Unifor Local 414 and Local 462’s offices for Ford, Labour Minister Monte McNaughton, and Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy to posture as friends of working people. Dias stated how “glad” he was that the government had “reversed course”—Ford had rolled back the minimum wage on coming to power in 2018—and

decided to “raise workers’ wages.”

Ford returned the favour a month later, appointing Dias to serve as chair of the Premier’s Council on US Trade and Industry Competitiveness. This body is responsible for lobbying US lawmakers to secure access for Canadian-made products to the US market, and offering up tax cuts and other pro-corporate subsidies to attract investment to the province’s auto, resource and manufacturing sectors on the basis of stepped-up worker exploitation. An Ontario government profile of the Council wrote with enthusiasm, “Dias assumed an active role in the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) as a consultant to the Canadian government and negotiating team, where he consistently pushed to raise labour standards domestically and internationally, maintain Canadian sovereignty and protect key domestic industries. ... During Detroit Three negotiations in 2020 he succeeded in securing the return of truck assembly to Oshawa with GM investing more than \$1.3 billion to build Silverado and Sierra models. In 2020 negotiations with Ford, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles and General Motors, Dias helped secure a total investment of nearly \$6 billion for auto facilities across Canada.”

The unions’ capitulation before the Tories, like all their efforts to smother worker opposition, arises out of the intensification of the class struggle. As millions of workers are propelled into struggle for better wages and conditions as the cost of living surges, the pandemic rages on, and the threat of world war looms ever larger, the greatest fear of the union bureaucracy is the development of a mass movement of the working class that would directly challenge the capitalist profit system upon which their cozy relationships with big business and the entire political establishment rests.

Workers must draw far-reaching political lessons from recent experiences in Ontario. The claim that workers must subordinate their struggles to the election of a “progressive” government has only strengthened the hand of Ford and the Tories, and facilitated a deepening of corporatist ties between the union bureaucracy and the very right-wing forces they claimed for years to be opposing. The only way forward for working people seeking to resist the savage attacks that the deeply unpopular Ford government will attempt to enforce during its second term is through an irreconcilable political break with the trade unions, and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace to organize a unified struggle of the working class independently of the OFL unions, Unifor, and the openly pro-Ford building trade unions. In this struggle, workers must confront head-on the domination of social and political life by the financial oligarchy by fighting for the redistribution of society’s vast wealth to meet pressing social needs and for the establishment of a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.



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