

Toronto unveils major hike in police budget as city's social crisis deepens

Omar Ali**12 February 2023**

As part of a general lurch further right in politics across Canada, Toronto Mayor John Tory announced a significant increase in the police budget at the beginning of the year. The allocation of close to \$50 million more for law enforcement is a 4.3 percent increase on what was already a bloated \$1.1 billion police budget in 2022.

Tory, who announced his sudden resignation last Friday after admitting to having an affair with a staffer, claimed that a spike in crime prompted the increase. The additional funds were "necessary to keep Toronto safe," he asserted. In comparison to the gusher of money being directed at the police, Tory announced just \$2 million for programs designed to "address the roots of violence." Predictably, the increase received unanimous approval from the Police Services Board on January 10. The increase is almost double last year's \$25 million hike and would add 200 new officers to the ranks.

As in other cities in the United States and Canada, Toronto's municipal government cited a slight uptick in violent crime since the onset of the pandemic as a pretext to expand the police. Faced with the ramifications of decades of social spending austerity, the ruling class is responding to rampant poverty, homelessness, and mental health and substance abuse issues by criminalizing their very presence. In a radio interview with the CBC, Tory specifically said he was trying to please downtown business interests, who were pleading with him for more police to make the city "safe."

The increased spending on the forces of state repression will exacerbate the city's already sharp fiscal crisis. Ontario municipalities are barred from running deficits. The federal Liberal and Doug Ford-led Ontario governments are fully committed to "post-pandemic" austerity, and the city administration to upholding a "low-tax" regime for big business and the generally more privileged layers who are homeowners. The city is therefore placing its financial woes on the backs of

workers and the most vulnerable.

The new municipal budget also includes cuts to public transit services. The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) is cutting service hours by 9 percent compared to the previous year. The loss of commuters during the pandemic has further strained an already underfunded service and the city is determined that riders should make up this gap with increases to fares of around 3 percent. The fare hike will fall disproportionately on the least well-off sections of workers, who lack access to private vehicles and can't work remotely.

While the TTC budget will increase overall, the extra money will do little to improve the service. A portion of the new funds is earmarked for 50 more transit police officers. These forces are primarily in place to harass homeless people who seek refuge in the subways, particularly during the cold winter months. Subway stations are one of the few options available to them, due to overflowing shelters and routine crackdowns on outdoor encampments by the city. The city council underscored its callous indifference to the plight of homeless people last week when it rejected a proposal to ensure warming centres are available at all times during winter months. It instead voted to "examine" the issue and return to it only at its April 25 meeting.

By then, winter will have passed, leaving a tragic trail of many more homeless deaths. According to data released last week, 202 homeless people in Toronto died last year, or, on average, four every week.

Apart from hiring additional police, the transit funding hike will go to building the Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit (LRT) line which will bisect much of the city. Under a so-called public-private partnership, large construction and engineering giants like EllisDon and SNC-Lavalin have handsomely enriched themselves during the now 10-year-long project. Meanwhile, its cost has ballooned and its completion continues to be delayed.

After a slight decline in late 2020, rents in the city have skyrocketed. Residents must devote an ever greater portion of their income to keep a roof over their heads. The high-interest regime instituted by global central banks to beat back the wage gains of the working class has made home buying, already out of reach for most, virtually unattainable for even the highest-earning workers. This has pushed more people into the rental market, allowing landlords to capitalize from the resulting bidding wars.

These factors have combined to render more Torontonians homeless. On an average night in December 2022, shelters in the city turned away more than 100 people.

The city authorities and their right-wing media allies have scapegoated the homeless, particularly those with mental health and substance abuse problems, to twist the arms of the public into accepting the “need” for more police. On the eve of the unveiling of the new budget, the media prominently featured a handful of violent incidents on transit facilities in December. These incidents underscore the growth of social tensions and the crisis facing the most impoverished sections of the population.

There is no shortage of resources in Toronto, which is the most unequal city in the nation according to Statistics Canada. Second and third place are taken by Calgary and Vancouver. Toronto is home to 17 billionaires by one count, including the country’s richest family. With assets including the Thomson-Reuters media conglomerate, the Thomsons are estimated to be worth more than C\$70 billion. As documented in Oxfam’s recent report on global wealth inequality, the richest 1 percent received 34 percent of wealth generated in the past decade in Canada. The bottom half of the population received only 5 percent over the same period. The same report found that during the pandemic billionaires in Canada have seen their wealth grow by 51 percent.

As social inequality rises at breathtaking speed, the ruling class relies more and more on the police and authoritarian forms of rule to protect its privileged position. As Friedrich Engels explained during the late 19th century, the police are part of the “special bodies of armed men,” at the disposal of the capitalist state, to defend the existing social and political order.

The right-wing shift in Toronto’s local politics is part of a general trend at all levels of government across the country. The Progressive Conservative Party provincial government, led by the erstwhile Trump enthusiast Premier Doug Ford, has enforced round after round of brutal austerity on workers. Ford is turning to increasingly

authoritarian forms of rule to impose his attacks on workers. Last fall, he sought to ban a strike by 55,000 education support workers and force through a massive real-terms pay cut. After the workers defied his draconian anti-strike measures, and amid growing calls for a general strike, Ford relied on the union bureaucracy to strangle the strike and implement a wage-cutting deal. At the federal level, Trudeau’s Liberals are working with their allies in the trade unions and New Democrats to spend billions on imperialist war and enforce austerity at home.

Tory’s ability to force through a huge hike in the police budget was due in part to laws introduced last year by the Ford government that dramatically strengthen the powers of the Toronto and Ottawa city mayors at the expense of the local city councils. A key goal of this reform was to ensure that the hard-right policies favored by Ford could be imposed without even token concessions to “progressive” politicians, i.e., local capitalist politicians aligned with the Liberals, NDP or Greens. Adopted last December, the Better Municipal Governance Act (Bill 39) allows the mayors of Ontario’s two largest cities to impose bylaws that are opposed by up to two-thirds of city council members. Tory requested this anti-democratic power from Ford after the Ontario government, earlier last fall, adopted its Strong Mayors Act. That law granted the mayors of Toronto and Ottawa sweeping powers over city budgets and staff hiring and firing.



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