

Far-right demagogue Danielle Smith leads United Conservatives to victory in Alberta election

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The United Conservative Party (UCP), led by far-right ideologue Danielle Smith, secured a comfortable victory in last week's Alberta election, winning 49 out of the 87 seats in the provincial legislature.

The election result was a damning indictment of the trade union-sponsored New Democrats' right-wing, pro-corporate record, and of the unions' role in suppressing the class struggle during the four years of UCP rule.

Smith's victory in no way expresses mass support for her party's "Alberta First," COVID-denying, far-right program, which aims to eviscerate all regulatory restraints on capital. The UCP took 52 percent of the vote on a turnout of just 62 percent, meaning that the incoming Smith government secured the support of less than a third of the electorate. Her government will have the slimmest parliamentary majority of any Alberta government in history, controlling just 10 seats more than the NDP once the speaker is appointed.

Smith came to prominence as a right-wing media commentator and subsequently led the right-wing populist Wildrose Party. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she promoted anti-vaccine positions and COVID conspiracy theories associated with fascistic groups. She was an outspoken supporter of the far-right "Freedom" Convoy, which menacingly occupied downtown Ottawa for three weeks in early 2022 with the support of important sections of the ruling elite. The Convoy, whose initiators and leaders called for the replacement of Canada's elected government by an authoritarian junta, were used by corporate Canada as a battering-ram to overcome popular resistance to the elimination of all remaining anti-COVID protections. After becoming premier last October, Smith intervened in the justice system to press for the dropping of charges against participants in the Convoy's illegal blockade of the Coutts border crossing between Alberta and the United States. This included weapons and conspiracy-to-murder charges laid by the RCMP against far-right Convoy supporters from whom they had seized a cache of weapons.

Underscoring the extent to which far-right politics and ties to fascists have become entirely acceptable within Canadian

bourgeois politics, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper and current Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre issued statements in the days before the Alberta vote urging the re-election of the Smith-led government.

NDP leader Rachel Notley, federal leader Jagmeet Singh, and other top officials in the party made much of the social democrats' gains in Alberta's May 29 election. The NDP picked up 15 seats in the legislature compared with their 2019 result, when Alberta's first-ever NDP government went down to defeat after just one-term in office. At 44 percent, the NDP's share of the popular vote in 2023 was its highest ever, with votes polarized between the two main parties, which between them captured all but 3.4 percent of all votes cast.

However, in the face of the UCP's record in government—austerity, public service privatization, a rollback in the minimum wage, attacks on the right-to-strike, and its ruinous "profits before life" pandemic response—the NDP's election result was an abysmal failure. The party's gains came almost entirely in Edmonton and Calgary, where it won 34 seats to the UCP's 12. Outside Alberta's major urban centres, the Conservatives won 90 percent of the seats.

The NDP's miserable showing is above all due to the fact that workers and young people do not consider it an alternative to the openly right-wing and even far-right forces who are now poised to dominate Alberta politics for the next four years. When Notley was Premier between 2015 and 2019, the NDP imposed public spending austerity and wage "restraint." Notley's headline campaign pledge was a tiny increase in the taxation of large and medium-sized corporations to 11 percent, which was meant to ensure that Alberta retained the country's lowest corporate tax rate.

Throughout the campaign, Notley focused her efforts on convincing big business that the NDP would better serve its interests than the "unpredictable" Smith, who spent much of the campaign trying to walk-back some of the more outrageous—and candid—of her far-right pronouncements, including her advocacy of for-profit health-care.

Notley and her NDP hailed the support they received from former Progressive Conservative government ministers,

including former Deputy Premier Thomas Lukaszuk, Attorney-General Jim Foster, and Municipal Affairs Minister Doug Griffiths. In 2017, the PCs united with the far-right Wildrose to create the UCP. Summing up the close relationship between Alberta's two main parties, no sooner was the outcome of the election apparent than Notley pledged her party's readiness to collaborate with the Smith government.

At the federal level, the NDP is associated with the Trudeau government's ruthless class-war agenda of waging imperialist war against Russia abroad and taking the axe to public spending at home. The Singh-led NDP has secured Trudeau's minority Liberals a parliamentary majority since 2019. Canada's social-democrats entered a formal parliamentary and governmental alliance with the Liberals in March 2022, under which they committed to prop up the government for the next three years.

The election campaign unfolded after four years in which working class opposition to the UCP's onslaught on public spending, slashing of public sector jobs, and privatization of services was suppressed by the trade unions. After the UCP tabled sweeping cuts in 2019 under former Premier Jason Kenney, including plans to lay off over 7,000 public sector workers and gut spending, Alberta Federation of Labour leaders blustered about the possibility of a "general strike" at a series of public meetings in December 2019.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, such rhetorical flourishes were nothing more than hot air aimed at containing the palpable anger among workers across the province over the destruction of their jobs, conditions, and public services. This assessment was confirmed by the unions' response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They collaborated with the province's powerful energy sector, other sections of big business, and the government to force workers back into unsafe workplaces. At meatpacking plants where massive COVID outbreaks had deadly consequences, union leaders arrogantly informed workers that they had no right under the "collective bargaining" system to strike or take other job action to oppose being exposed to a potentially fatal and debilitating virus.

Any mass protests that did break out against the UCP over the past four years did so in direct opposition to the union bureaucracy. In October 2020, health care workers across the province launched a wildcat strike to protest miserable pay and conditions. The unions dutifully submitted without a fight to a labour board ruling that criminalized the job action, clearing the way for Alberta Health Services to discipline the workers. After Kenney made Alberta a pandemic hotspot by abolishing all COVID public health measures in the summer of 2021, protests erupted under the leadership of doctors and other health care professionals, not the trade unions.

Across Canada, the unions were no less brutal in the enforcement of the ruling elite's dictates. Opposition by workers to the deadly back-to-work campaign was strangled everywhere. Then, as the far-right Convoy occupied downtown

Ottawa to demand the scrapping of all remaining pandemic restrictions, the unions sabotaged all mass working-class protests against the fascist mob. Just over a month later, the country's senior-most union bureaucrats helped broker the "confidence-and-supply" deal between the Trudeau Liberal government and the federal New Democrats so as to ensure that the minority government would have "political stability" to wage war abroad and impose austerity at home through June 2025.

It is a measure of how far to the right official politics has moved that in the aftermath of the Convoy, UCP members deemed Kenney too "moderate" to continue as Alberta premier. A senior minister in Harper's hard-right Tory government notorious for his social conservatism and hostility to socialism, Kenney was unceremoniously ousted and replaced by the far-right Smith last fall.

The Alberta NDP is a close ally of the Trudeau Liberal government, although during the election campaign it joined with Smith in opposing any cap on Big Oil carbon emissions. The NDP's opposition to Smith's "Alberta First" regionalism is not from the standpoint of opposing the far-right and unifying workers in struggle regardless of their regional or ethnic origin, but from their desire to uphold the power and integrity of the Canadian ruling class' federal state. The NDP has denounced the Alberta Sovereignty Act—Smith-authored legislation that unconstitutionally claims the provincial government has the power to refuse to enforce any federal law it deems hurts "Alberta's interests"—as "bad for investment" because it creates "uncertainty" and undermines the "rule of law."

Sections of the ruling elite who fear a Smith-led UCP government will stoke regional tensions within the Canadian ruling class that could quickly spin out of control as the world capitalist crisis deepens threw their support behind the NDP in the May 29 election. This fear, together with the concern that Smith could serve as a lightning rod for popular opposition due to her explicitly far-right politics, helps to explain why the *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece of the Bay Street elite, declined to explicitly endorse the UCP. The more conservative *National Post* and Post Media network were less circumspect. They called for and warmly applauded the UCP's victory.



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