

Newly constituted far-right party could win British Columbia elections due to New Democrats' anti-worker record

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Voters in British Columbia, Canada's third most populous province, are set to go to the polls Saturday to elect a new provincial parliament. As the campaign comes to a close, most polls show a dead heat between the BC New Democratic Party (BC NDP), which heads the country's longest tenured provincial social democratic government, and the BC Conservative Party, a newly constituted far-right formation.

The NDP government, a close ally of the trade union-backed Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, faces the threat of defeat due to its constant attacks on the working class since it came to power in 2017. From pandemic policies that insisted on a profits before lives public health response, to the imposition of below-inflation contracts on public sector workers through their close alliance with the trade union bureaucracy, and a refusal to tame the most expensive housing market in the country, the NDP has consistently upheld the interests of big business and abandoned even the meagre promises it made to workers to get elected.

The ruling elite in Canada's westernmost province is determined to push politics sharply further right, a fact underscored by the course of the campaign.

Under pressure from powerful sections of big business, the leader of the official opposition BC United Party—a coalition of federal Liberals and Conservatives that under the name of the BC Liberal Party had governed the province from 2001 to 2017—engineered a reverse takeover by the rival BC Conservatives virtually on the eve of the election campaign's formal launch. For more than half a century, the BC Conservatives were moribund, without even a single elected legislator. But they have enjoyed a sudden rise in popularity, after John Rustad, a BC Liberal legislator expelled for his far-right views, assumed the leadership in 2022. Although they are a separate party, the BC Conservatives have been able to tap into the increased support for the federal Conservatives and have adopted the right-wing populist anti-carbon tax “axe the tax” mantra of federal Tory leader Pierre Poilievre as their own.

The BC Conservatives' elevation into a contender for power is in keeping with the rapid rightward evolution of bourgeois politics across Canada. The union and NDP-backed Trudeau Liberal government has implemented the ruling class's agenda, making Canadian imperialism a major player in the US-NATO instigated

war on Russia, backing Israel's genocidal assault on the Palestinians, dramatically increasing military spending, and imposing inflation-driven real wage cuts on working people, including through a systematic assault on workers' right to strike. Yet much of the ruling class has soured on Trudeau and is baying for a Conservative government led by the far-right agitator Poilievre to intensify imperialist war abroad and class war at home.

Within the provincial political realm, recent years have seen the coming to power of a series of far-right parties including the United Conservatives in Alberta and the Coalition Avenir Quebec in Quebec, and the rise of figures like Ontario Premier Doug Ford, whose initial enthusiasm for the fascist-minded ex-US President Donald Trump has proven no barrier to his embrace by Toronto's financial oligarchy.

In 2023, the BC Liberals rebranded themselves as the BC United Party with the double objective of emphasizing their distinction from Trudeau's Liberals and distancing themselves from their own political record of right-wing rule, characterized by ruthless austerity and savage attacks on hospital workers, teachers and other public sector workers.

In 2017, after 16 years in office, the BC Liberals had lost power to a minority NDP government supported by the Greens. The minority BC NDP government quickly trashed the meagre promises of improved public services the party had made in winning election. It firmly adhered to its pledge to implement the Liberals' financial framework of ultra-low taxes for business and the rich and social spending austerity. So satisfied was the ruling class with the BC NDP government, including its pandemic response, the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of finance capital, endorsed its return to power in the October 2020 election.

On August 28, BC United leader Kevin Falcon shocked his parliamentary caucus, to say nothing of the party membership. Without any forewarning, he announced that following the failure of secret “unity” negotiations with the BC Conservatives, he was unilaterally “suspending” the party's campaign, so as to leave the field clear for the Conservatives to contest the election as the sole avowedly pro-big business, right-wing alternative to the NDP.

BC Conservative leader Rustad promptly announced that the Conservatives would pick and choose from BC United's twenty-plus members of the provincial legislature, allowing only those

deemed right-wing enough to stand for election under the Conservative banner.

Falcon's takedown of his own party and public blessing of Rusted, whom he had thrown out of the BC Liberal/United Party, as the province's next premier was a public humiliation. However, he no doubt calculated it would help him secure a lucrative job at one of BC's major corporations.

The NDP's attempt to criticize Falcon for his anti-democratic methods and its alleged concern for the rights of BC United Party members are deeply hypocritical. It was only two years ago that the BC NDP themselves enacted a democratic charade after John Horgan resigned as party leader and premier, and the party leadership attempted to coronate current Premier David Eby as his successor. Anjali Appadurai, a relative outsider and self-styled eco-socialist, was able to sign up thousands of new members with demagogic attacks on the party leadership and pledges to shift the BC NDP to the "left." Fearing that the campaign would result in Eby's defeat and act as a rallying point for opposition in the working class to the government's right-wing agenda, the NDP abruptly terminated the leadership campaign. A ruling by the executive committee disqualified Appadurai on a technicality, with Horgan labelling her and her supporters as "thugs."

Stephanie Smith, then leader of the largest public service worker union in the province, the British Columbia General Employees Union (BCGEU), was a member of the executive committee that made the decision to disqualify Appadurai. Only a few months earlier, she had betrayed her membership by colluding with the government to impose a below-inflation pay agreement on them, setting the stage for the imposition of the same contract on virtually all provincial public sector workers.

The suppression of the class struggle by the NDP and its union allies has cleared the way for the ruling class to turn to Rustad and the far-right. The BC Conservative leader effectively kicked off his campaign by appearing on an hour-long episode of notorious right-wing provocateur Jordan Peterson's podcast on September 2. This appearance underscored his intent to appeal to the most reactionary layers of British Columbian society. During the interview Rustad laid out his intentions as premier if elected. This included claims that he would strip existing environmental regulations for the forestry industry, put a halt to further "reconciliation" efforts with the province's indigenous communities, and speed up efforts to create a two-tier health care system.

Over the course of the campaign, Rustad has come to the defence of numerous Conservative candidates who have been demonstrated to have racist and fascist views. To cite just one example, he has staunchly defended Brent Chapman, the Conservative candidate for the Vancouver-area riding of Surrey South, who was revealed to have made social media posts in 2015 referring to Muslims as "inbred" and Palestinians as "breathing time bombs."

Eby and the NDP, for their part, have attempted to paint Rustad as an eccentric loon, and put up billboards across the province, labelling him as "risky." They have drawn attention to the fact that Rustad has previously pandered to elements of the "Freedom" Convoy, which menacingly occupied downtown Ottawa in January-February 2022 and whose instigators called for the establishment

of a junta to abolish COVID public health measures. Rustad also promotes climate change denial and Christian fundamentalists.

All of this is true enough, but it only begs the question as to why such reactionary forces are in the ascendancy in a province governed by the NDP for the past seven years?

It is the BC NDP, with its reactionary track record in government, together with its allies in the union bureaucracy, that shoulder chief blame for the rightward shift of official BC politics. The party's 7 years in power have seen savage and repeated attacks on the working class. They imposed wage controls on the public sector workforce, during a period of record high inflation, in collusion with the trade union bureaucracy. Under then Premier John Horgan, Health Minister Adrian Dix and the province's Chief Public Health Officer, Bonnie Henry, the province imposed only minimal public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed thousands in BC. Indeed, the province has gained much international scorn from the public health community because of its refusal to recognize aerosol spread of COVID and the efficacy of masking in public spaces. The unions have helped enforce this agenda by disarming all worker opposition and confining it to the "collective bargaining" straitjacket.

The BC NDP's right-wing course mirrors that of the federal Liberals, its close political ally. The Trudeau government has spent the past nine years enforcing public spending austerity, handing out hundreds of billions to corporate Canada during the pandemic, and waging wars abroad in alliance with American imperialism. This class war agenda, backed by the federal NDP and Canadian Labour Congress, has left the field clear for the far-right demagogue Pierre Poilievre to posture as a man of the people and opponent of the powers that be. Poilievre's Tories would come to power with a huge majority if an election were held today, according to the polls.

Federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh led the 25 NDP members of parliament in supporting Trudeau's Liberals in a confidence-and-supply agreement for over two years. Although he withdrew from the agreement earlier this fall for tactical considerations as an election looms, Singh and his allies in the union bureaucracy continue to portray Trudeau's Liberals as a "progressive" ally against the Tories, even as the Trudeau government illegalizes strikes and has made Canadian imperialism a major player in a developing US-led global war for the repartition of the world.

Workers going to the polls Saturday in BC face a poisoned chalice, with both parties contending for power committed to imperialist war, austerity and increased attacks on democratic rights. Only the emergence of a politically independent and unified working class, freed from the shackles of the union/NDP/Liberal alliance in BC and across Canada can offer any progressive answers to the deteriorating material conditions they face.



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