

Ontario's “tariff war” election and the crisis of working-class leadership

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Ontario voters go to the polls this Thursday in what Doug Ford, the province's hard-right Progressive Conservative premier, has sought to frame as a “tariff war” election.

For the past month, Ford has crisscrossed Canada's most populous and industrialized province, claiming his government needs a massive electoral mandate to shield working people from the 25 percent tariffs US President Donald Trump is poised to impose on Canadian and Mexican imports on Tuesday, March 4.

Ford's bombast about “protecting Ontario” and “Ontario jobs” is a sham and a lie. His real agenda is defending the profits and geostrategic interests of Canadian imperialism.

Faced with an impending trade war and threats of outright annexation from Washington, his Conservative government and the Canadian ruling class as a whole are preparing to:

- embroil working people in a reactionary tit-for-tat trade war that will be waged at the expense of the jobs and living standards of workers on both sides of the border;
- forge a closer military-security alliance with US imperialism;
- strengthen the “competitive” position of Canadian capitalism, by slashing corporate taxes, privatizing public services, and gutting all environmental and regulatory restraints on capital.

Ford is a widely despised figure, a Trump wannabe, who consorts with the far-right, flaunts his ignorance and routinely proclaims his “love” of the police.

Yet if the opinion polls are correct, his Tories will win a thumping parliamentary majority on Thursday.

This is above all an indictment of the trade union bureaucracy and their traditional political allies, the social-democratic NDP. They have systematically suppressed the class struggle, while propping up the Justin Trudeau-led minority federal Liberal government as it criminalized dock, rail and postal worker strikes, waged imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine, supported Israel's genocide of the Palestinians and worked with the Bank of Canada to impose inflation-driven real wage cuts on working people.

In November 2022, when 55,000 Ontario education workers rebelled against a savage anti-strike law galvanizing mass working-class opposition to Ford, the union bureaucracy conspired with the Tory provincial government to shut it down.

Last December, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, working in close concert with the Canadian Labour Congress, ordered striking Canada Post workers to surrender to a patently illegal Liberal government strike breaking order, even as the government was imploding.

As Ford was laying the groundwork for his snap election call last month, the opposition parties insisted that they preferred his government serve out the remaining 18 months in its mandate. Meanwhile, the Ontario Federation of Labour put itself forward as Ford's “partner,” calling for a tri-partite tariff-war task force comprised of senior corporate, government and union representatives. If the opposition is unable to differentiate itself

from Ford, it is because the Liberals, NDP and Greens stand for the same thing—upholding the interests of Canadian capital.

Ford's fraudulent election

Ford's claim that he called the election because he needs a popular mandate to “oppose” Trump is a palpable fraud and in multiple ways.

Firstly, the premier, as is commonly known, had long been searching for a pretext to go to the polls. This is because he fears the escalation of class struggle that would accompany the coming to power in Ottawa of a far-right Pierre Poilievre-led government would jeopardize his future electability. Also, Ford was anxious to get the elections out of the way before the likely laying of criminal charges in the RCMP's ongoing investigation into the “Greenbelt Scandal”—the Ford government's opening up of environmentally sensitive “Greenbelt” lands north of Toronto for development by Tory-connected construction and real estate firms.

Secondly, and more importantly, Ford wants a “strong mandate” to impose Trump-style policies—that is a massive attack on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

Ford was caught on a hot mic declaring that he was glad that the failed 2021 coup-plotter and would-be dictator Trump was elected last November. His and the Canadian ruling class' only objection is that Trump is refusing to accord them what they believe is their due as junior partners of American imperialism, including guaranteed access to the lucrative US market.

Through trips to Washington DC, newspaper op-eds, and repeated appearances on Fox News, Ford has pitched his call for Canada to be part of a Trump-led Fortress North America, or what he has dubbed a “Fortress Am-Can” explicitly aimed against China.

The Ontario Tory government record

The record of the Ford government demonstrates that its only concern in the face of potential US tariffs is not “protecting jobs,” but protecting the profitability and trade position of Canadian capital.

- Entering office in 2018, Ford implemented Trump-style policies, including a roll-back of the minimum wage, a public sector hiring freeze, and \$6 billion in cuts to welfare and healthcare spending. His government also imposed a three-year, one percent per annum pay cap on over a million public sector workers, which was subsequently ruled to be illegal by the courts, but for which workers have never been fully compensated.

- The Ford government has attacked basic democratic rights, including by repeatedly using or threatening to invoke the “notwithstanding clause,” which permits the government to run roughshod over basic rights supposedly guaranteed under the Canadian constitution’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The most notorious example of this came in November 2022, when Ford invoked the “Notwithstanding clause” to preemptively ban a strike by 55,000 education support workers.

- In line with Canada’s entire ruling class, Ford’s response to the COVID 19 pandemic was criminal negligence. His embrace together with the Trudeau federal government of a “profits before life” policy claimed the lives of more than 16,500 Ontario workers and seniors, and tens of thousands more across Canada. Ford prematurely ended all COVID-19 public health and safety measures and any reporting on the pandemic, despite repeated outbreaks that continue to sicken and kill workers.

- Ford initially allied himself with the far-right “Freedom Convoy” protesters who menacingly occupied downtown Ottawa and remained virtually silent as the occupation dragged on for close to a month. As the WSWS wrote in November 2022, “Ford was exposed in a leaked video promising a prominent Convoy supporter, whilst Ottawa was under occupation, that he would be “pulling these (vaccine) passports” and ‘getting back to normal.’”

- Ford has played a major role in Canadian imperialism’s unrestrained backing of Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. He has attacked and vilified the Palestinian solidarity movement, banned the keffiyeh at the Ontario legislature, smeared peaceful protesters as “antisemites,” and pressed for police action against them.

The filthy role of the trade union bureaucracy and NDP

Ford could not implement his anti-democratic, class-warfare agenda without the complicity and assistance of the union bureaucracy and trade union-sponsored NDP.

The NDP campaign has been nearly invisible, and its threadbare proposals, “hiring more doctors, fixing schools, building homes and defending Ontario jobs,” merely serve as cover for the anti-worker agenda that an NDP government would impose if the party came to power, as it has done in every provincial government it has led for the past 35 years. The NDP promise of a “grocery rebate” cheque is rich coming from a party that just scrapped a similar pledge in British Columbia before it was even launched, in the name of “finding dollars” to prop up Canadian big business in the trade war with the US.

Based on the calculation that NDP and Liberal political fortunes are collapsing, important sections of the union bureaucracy, including many of the building trades unions and sections of Unifor, are now plumping for a vote for Ford and his Tories.

In January, Laura Walton, the president of the pro-NDP Ontario Federation of Labour, proposed the creation of a “Labour-Business-Community Anti-Tariff Task Force” together with the provincial government. When Ford met her proposal with stony silence, Walton groveled in front of the press, declaring, “I’m not going to use that as an excuse to give up on a good idea. His office has my cell number, and we’re ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work.”

Ford has Walton’s number alright.

Walton was catapulted into her position as leader of the OFL by her fellow bureaucrats after, as head of the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), she played a critical role in scuttling the November 2022 “illegal” strike of 55,000 Ontario education support workers. The strike, launched in defiance of Ford’s invocation of the “notwithstanding clause” to ban it, threatened to escape the bureaucracy’s stifling control

and become the catalyst for a broader working class offensive.

The strike began on a Friday and immediately galvanized enormous support in the working class, with teachers, students and other workers joining OSBCU picket lines. During the weekend, workers flocked to strike support rallies, many of them spontaneously organized. Polls showed overwhelming support for solidarity strikes. The strike movement was threatening to turn into a political general strike against the government and in defence of public services. As the WSWS noted,

This prospect terrified the Trudeau government, Canada’s union leaderships, and the NDP. They responded by taking coordinated steps to strangle the movement and impose a sellout.

Top union bureaucrats from the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor, the Ontario Federation of Labour and CUPE responded to the burgeoning working-class movement by calling Ford and his senior aides to beg them for a deal. They pleaded with him to withdraw his strike ban so that the union apparatus could enforce it in practice. As soon as Ford announced the withdrawal of Bill 28 on the morning of November 7, union leaders ordered education workers without any democratic consultation to “collapse” their pickets and return to work without a single demand having been realized.

A month later, Walton and the CUPE-affiliated OSBCU rammed through a concessions-filled contract that imposed a real-wage cut on the poorly-paid education support workers.

This is far from the only service rendered to the Ford government by the bureaucracy.

After the far-right Israeli regime launched its genocide against the Palestinians, the union bureaucracy and the NDP openly connived with Ford in the demonization of Hamilton Centre MPP Sarah Jama as an “antisemite.” ONDP leader Marit Stiles capitulated and adapted to the slanders of the Ford Government, expelling her from the NDP caucus and setting the stage for Ford to censure her in parliament, which banned her from speaking on any issue. The NDP has gone on to block Jama from standing as a candidate for the party in Thursday’s vote.

In 2024, Walton and the OFL worked overtime to confine the mass movement of youth and students against Israel’s genocidal onslaught against the Palestinians to pathetic, moral appeals directed at the ruling class. When the student solidarity encampment was confronted with violent threats from fascist Zionists, leading union bureaucrats made empty declarations that “We will be your human shields.” But they refused to mobilize workers in opposition to Ford and the ruling elite’s support for the genocide, allowing the police to violently evict the students shortly thereafter.

Build a new mass party of the working class!

The objective interests of the working class in Ontario find no expression whatsoever in official political life. Doug Ford’s “Fortress Am-Can” will be built on the backs of the working class. With the assistance of the union bureaucracy, he intends to impose massive rollbacks in workers’ wages, working conditions, and public services in order to make Canadian capital “more competitive.”

Workers in Ontario and across the country will not take the coming attacks lying down. A period of immense social and political struggles, mass protests and strikes lie immediately ahead. These struggles require a

political leadership armed with a perspective which has assimilated the lessons of past struggles, and a program which advances the real interests of the working class.

Workers in Ontario cannot defend their basic interests and oppose Ford's class war agenda within the borders of the province. Rejecting the foul nationalism peddled by Ford, Trudeau, the union bureaucrats, and Trump, workers must take up a struggle for the industrial and political mobilization of the working class across Canada, in alliance with their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and internationally against the ruling elite's onslaught on workers' democratic and social rights. This requires a complete political and organizational break from the suffocating union/NDP/Liberal alliance, and a turn to a socialist and internationalist program. To fight for this strategy, a new party—the Socialist Equality Party—must be built to politically lead the struggles of the North American working class. We strongly encourage all workers and young people who agree with this strategy to take the decision today to join and build this party.



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