

# Ontario Tories win third term with union-backed Canadian nationalist campaign in “tariff war” election

Roger Jordan  
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Ontario Premier Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservatives won a third term in Thursday’s provincial election following a campaign dominated by Canadian nationalist tub-thumping.

Ford, who has presided over vicious attacks on public services and worker rights since 2018, postured throughout the campaign as a man of the people, leading “Team Canada” against US President Donald Trump’s threats to impose punishing tariffs and annex Canada. That he could parlay this into an election victory was entirely due to the political bankruptcy of the so-called “progressive” New Democrats and Liberals, and the suppression of working-class opposition by the trade union bureaucracies.

Ford called the snap election in late January, more than a year ahead of schedule, framing it as necessary to secure his government a “strong mandate” to “protect Ontario” from Trump’s threat to impose 25 percent tariffs on Canadian imports.

This was a monstrous fraud. Ford’s concern is, as it has always been, to advance the interests of Canadian capital at the expense of the working class at home, and Canadian imperialism’s rivals overseas.

The Tories secured a decisive parliamentary majority, winning 80 of the 124 seats in the Ontario Legislature, on a 43 percent share of the popular vote. However, the government’s true support is far less than meets the eye. Only 45 percent of voters chose to cast a ballot, up marginally from the historic low of 43 percent recorded in 2022, meaning less than one in five Ontarians actually voted for the Tories.

The NDP, the traditional party of the trade union bureaucracy, managed to retain “official opposition” status, but only due to the vagaries of the first-past-the-post electoral system. With an 18.6 percent vote share it won 27 seats, down from the 31 it won in 2022 and 40 in 2018, when the Liberals were reduced to a rump after 15 years of right-wing, austerity rule.

Since 2018—a period almost all of which the federal NDP has spent, with the unions’ encouragement, propping up the minority Trudeau Liberal government—support for the Ontario NDP has plummeted, with the party losing more than half of its voters. Whereas the NDP won 1.93 million votes in 2018, it garnered just 931,000 in Thursday’s election, a 15 percentage-point drop in its share of the popular vote.

The Liberals managed to take 14 seats, securing two more than the 12 needed for official party status in the legislature. The remaining three seats were taken by the Greens (two) and a Tory-aligned independent.

## **The NDP and unions’ promotion of Canadian nationalism and suppression of class struggle**

Ford’s election campaign was based on the big lie currently being peddled by the entire Canadian ruling class through its political parties and media outlets that “we are all in this together” in the face of Trump’s threatened tariffs, and must rally behind the ruling class’s “Team Canada.” Ford—a long-standing admirer of the fascist-minded occupant of the White House who has implemented social policies that Trump himself would approve of—was often sighted on the campaign trail in a “Canada is Not for Sale” hat.

The Premier continued to spout Canadian nationalism on election night, declaring in his victory speech, “Well friends, the people have spoken. They’re ready to stand up for Canada. Donald Trump thinks he can break us ... He is underestimating us. He is underestimating the resilience of the Canadian people, the Canadian spirit.”

To the extent that such reactionary nostrums won a hearing, it is the responsibility of the trade union bureaucracy and the NDP social democrats. For decades, these forces have promoted Canadian nationalism, contrasting a supposedly “progressive” Canadian capitalism to the rapacious US dollar republic, and used it to divide workers across North America, thereby facilitating a sustained onslaught on the wages and working conditions of workers on both sides of the border that continues to this day.

A critical episode in this process was the split engineered by the Canadian section of the United Auto Workers (UAW) to form the Canadian Auto Workers union in 1985, on the basis of the supposedly more “militant” Canadian union. The CAW, which subsequently became Unifor in 2013, connived in the decimation of tens of thousands of auto and manufacturing jobs in southern Ontario in particular. CAW/Unifor blocked any joint working class opposition to the bosses’ attacks by pitting American and Canadian workers against each other. This process continued in the 2023 Detroit Three negotiations, when Unifor, like the UAW bureaucrats, opposed any joint struggle against the auto bosses, although for the first time in decades Canadian and American workers were negotiating new contracts simultaneously.

Over the past seven years, the unions and their NDP allies have worked systematically to smother worker opposition to Ford’s unrelenting austerity, gutting of democratic rights, privatization of health care, and handouts for his cronies in the corporate and financial elites. This has included suppressing a sustained strike wave that

swept across all economic sectors in Ontario and Canada since late 2021. It also saw the NDP collaborate with Ford in smearing protesters against Israel's genocide of the Palestinians as "antisemites," including by throwing one of their own Ontario legislators, Sarah Jama, out of the NDP parliamentary caucus and blocking her from standing on the party's ticket. Running as an independent, Jama lost her Hamilton-Centre seat to the NDP's candidate Thursday, finishing fourth with just under 15 percent of the vote.

Many union leaders took the next logical step in their role as suppressors of the class struggle by openly stumping for Ford during the election campaign or pleading—like Ontario Federation of Labour President Laura Walton—to collaborate with him in formulating Ontario's response to the looming trade war.

This response will consist of deepening the onslaught on public services, jobs, working conditions, and social programs, and finding new ways to cut taxes and boost handouts to the corporate elite. In his election night victory speech Ford made a point of declaring that he had secured a "strong mandate." This mandate, he boasted, includes making "Ontario the most competitive place in the G7 to invest, create jobs, and do business," and using police and new repressive laws to dismantle homeless encampments.

#### **"National Unity": a smokescreen for class war**

Ford's victory was warmly welcomed throughout Canada's political establishment. Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, held up by the union bureaucracies for years as a "progressive" ally in the struggle to stop Ford and the Tories, wrote on X, "Congratulations, Doug Ford, on your re-election. Ontario and Canada are at their best when we work together—to defend Canadian interests, protect workers, and make life more affordable. Wishing you and your team the best as you head back to work for the people of Ontario."

The CBC, Canada's government-funded public broadcaster, could barely conceal its excitement over the rabidly nationalist campaign that produced Ford's victory. Ford's winning of a third term was "the result of a campaign that focused ruthlessly on the one issue capturing the minds of Canadians right now, a leader who worked relentlessly to make the most of his opportunity, and perfect political timing," its main election analysis piece enthused. "Success in politics means winning elections, so the majority three-peat means the name Doug Ford must now be included ... in conversations about the most successful Ontario premiers of all time."

The blitz to crown Ford—a multi-millionaire who inherited his wealth from his father, who was also a Conservative legislator in Ontario—as one of the leading standard-bearers of the Canadian nation is no less repugnant than the embrace of Trump by the American oligarchy. Starting his political career with a Trump-style campaign in 2018 based on bogus claims to be speaking up for the "little guy" against the "elites" from downtown Toronto, Ford has emerged as one of the key enforcers of savage austerity and the gutting of worker rights in Canada. This class war agenda goes hand-in-hand with Canadian imperialism's investment of tens of billions of dollars to wage aggressive wars around the world in pursuit of its global interests. His record of "profits before life" during the COVID-19 pandemic; trampling on worker rights, including by invoking the

"notwithstanding clause" to preemptively criminalize an impending education support staff strike; huge cuts to budgets for schools and post-secondary education; redirection of public health care budgets to private providers; and business deregulation testifies to the absurdity of the claims by the unions, Liberals, and New Democrats that workers have common interests with the likes of Ford and his corporate backers as part of "Team Canada."

The ruling elite's honeymoon following Ford's victory will be short-lived. Trump pledged this week that 25 percent tariffs will come into force against Canadian imports as of March 4, triggering retaliatory tariffs by Canada that Trudeau and Ford have taken the lead in promoting. But regardless of whether the tariffs are introduced as planned or a further last-minute delay is agreed upon, the ruling classes on both sides of the 49th parallel are already deepening their assault on the working class to make workers pay for the costs of trade war and military rearmament.

The working class will therefore sooner rather than later come into headlong conflict with the Ford government in Ontario, as all Canadian and US workers will with Trudeau's soon to be crowned successor in Ottawa and Trump in Washington. In this fight, workers will have to confront the unions and NDP, who are pledged to support Ford and the Canadian ruling class in imposing the costs of trade war onto working people. Ontario NDP leader Marit Stiles noted on election night, "I really do want to offer him any possible help that we can provide in the face of the threat of Donald Trump. The threat is real and I deeply believe we can overcome it with a strong Team Ontario and a strong Team Canada approach."

Unifor President Lana Payne chimed in, with her post-election statement declaring, "We fully expect the Ford government to get back to the urgent priority of defending good jobs in Ontario and securing a more resilient economy for future generations. The Ford government must do this by taking cues from working people and their unions." In other words, Payne will give Ford the "cues" on how to organize layoffs, wage cuts, and the gutting of worker rights without triggering a social explosion.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in an article previewing the Ontario election, "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."



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