

Alberta's far-right "independence" referendum: the issues for the working class

Keith Jones
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Alberta's far-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government has called an Alberta independence referendum for Monday, October 19.

Due to an adverse court ruling, independence per se will not be on the ballot. Rather, Albertans will be asked if they want the UCP government to hold a "binding provincial referendum" on Alberta's secession from the federal state.

The UCP's Alberta independence referendum is part of its broader assault on the social rights of the working class and its efforts to enhance the power and wealth of Alberta's energy barons and financial elite within the Canadian federal state.

The question on Alberta independence is the tenth of ten government-authored questions on the referendum ballot. All are cut from the same reactionary cloth.

The first four relate to immigration and amplify the UCP's campaign to scapegoat immigrants for the increased economic distress facing working people due to the capitalist crisis and, specifically, for the crisis in health care and other public services resulting from decades of government austerity. They are meant to provide a facade of popular legitimacy for the government denying vital public services, such as health care, to refugee-claimants, temporary foreign workers and all other non-Alberta government-"approved" permanent residents; and at bolstering the provincial government in its demands for a greater role in determining immigration policy, so as to tailor it even more to the needs of big business.

Question five—in an echo of the anti-immigrant, voter-suppression drive of the would-be US dictator Donald Trump—seeks support for making it mandatory for Albertans to provide proof of citizenship when voting.

Questions six through nine are meant to rally support for the Alberta government's demands for constitutional "reform" to enhance the powers of the provincial government. These demands include giving provincial laws "priority" or precedence over federal laws in areas of "shared jurisdiction."

Alberta Premier Danielle Smith and her government are formally committed to Alberta remaining within a "reformed" or radically reconfigured Canadian federal state, in which Alberta's capitalist elite would have both greater autonomy from Ottawa and a greater say over national policy. This would include dismantling both the legal-constitutional and fiscal framework for the federal government's guarantee that all provinces and territories adhere to minimum national standards in the provision of public health care and other essential services and social supports.

Smith's strategy rests on leveraging Trump's barrage of threats against Canada, including to transform it into the 51st state.

Not only has she conspicuously stood apart from the federal government-led, tri-partite Team Canada trade-war alliance and vehemently condemned any and all suggestions that Ottawa make use of Alberta's massive oil and natural gas exports to the US to place pressure on Washington. She has travelled to the US to court Trump's favour. As part

of her efforts to strike a separate deal with Washington, Smith has publicly pledged to put Alberta's vast energy wealth at the disposal of Trump in using "energy dominance" to assert American imperialist global hegemony.

Similarly, Smith has actively encouraged the Alberta separatists, who since their emergence in the 1980s have always been of and for the far right and bitterly hostile to the working class. "Alberta First" tub-thumping and the mobilization of the far-right elements from which the Alberta separatists draw their core support ("Freedom" Convoy activists, anti-vaxxers, Christian fundamentalists, and Elon Musk-style "libertarians") were critical to Smith's successful 2022 campaign to wrest the UCP leadership and premiership from the former Harper Conservative cabinet minister Jason Kenney.

Since her UCP government won re-election in May 2023, Smith has with increasing shrillness put the federal government on notice that failure to address "Alberta's demands" would provoke an unprecedented "constitutional crisis." At the beginning of this year, her government pushed through legislation that dramatically slashed the number of petition signatures required to force a "citizen-initiated" referendum, with the clear aim of facilitating the separatists' efforts. Then, when the courts ruled the petitioners' Yes/No question on independence could not go forward due to the government's failure to consult with First Nations on how their treaty rights would be upheld in the event of a Yes vote, the UCP government itself put the issue of independence on the referendum ballot, albeit in a convoluted form so as to get round the court decision.

Smith's ten-question referendum is a reactionary ploy that—as intended—has emboldened the most radical, fascistic fringe of the far-right. The Alberta separatist leaders openly declare their affinity for Trump and his MAGA movement, promote "remigration" (the expulsion of immigrants), and denounce virtually any social program or taxation of the rich as "communism." Alberta Prosperity Project leaders Jeffrey Rath, Dennis Modry, and Mitch Sylvestre boast of their meetings with US State Department and Republican Party officials, with Modry telling the *Globe and Mail* the Alberta separatists would be willing to provide Washington with a share of Alberta government royalties on tar-sands oil and access to its water in exchange for diplomatic recognition.

By placing "independence" on the ballot, Smith hopes to satisfy the separatist activists in her own party; secure Yes votes from the separatists for the other nine referendum questions (whose passage her government is heavily invested in); and demonstrate to her opponents within Canada's capitalist political and economic establishment that they best strike a deal with her, lest the support for separatism grows.

For a working-class counter-offensive against the UCP, Carney and Trump

Workers in Alberta and across North America have every reason to oppose Smith, her far-right UCP government and the would-be minions of Trump in the Alberta separatist movement. The UCP government's reactionary referendum proposals should be rejected en bloc.

But if workers are to defend their social and democratic rights they must do so from their own class standpoint—as part of the struggle to develop a working-class counteroffensive across North America against the program of austerity, rearmament, war, and intensified worker-exploitation being pursued by the UCP in Alberta, the federal Liberal government in Ottawa, Trump and all the political representatives of the ruling class, whether nominally left, liberal or right.

Conditions to build such a movement are favourable. Contrary to the reactionary regionalist and outright Alberta separatist positions stoked by the UCP government and its far-right allies, the experiences of workers in Alberta are the same as those across the continent: vicious austerity to pay for militarism and war, crumbling public services, declining real wages, and dangerous workplaces. The upsurge of rejected contracts by workers throughout the American auto parts industry over the summer, the ongoing strike by over 1,200 workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario, and the thousands of workers facing the threat of layoff due to the reactionary trade war conflict between American and Canadian imperialism underscore that the objective conditions for unifying and mobilizing workers across all artificial divisions to oppose war, austerity, and the growth of dictatorial forms of rule have matured.

Forging an independent political movement of the working class necessitates a no less relentless struggle against the official, trade union and NDP-supported opposition to the Alberta separatists. Led by Liberal Prime Minister Carney, Jason Kenney, and Rachel Notley, the ex-Alberta NDP premier, the pro-Canada campaign counterposes to Alberta separatism full-throated Canadian nationalism—that is, the banner behind which the ruling class pursues its predatory class interests at the expense of working people at home and abroad. It seeks to corral working people behind corporate Canada, and its political representatives in defence of Canadian capitalism and its federal state.

The pro-Canada Alberta referendum campaign is a corollary to the Canadian ruling class' Team Canada trade-war alliance, of which the unions and NDP are an integral part.

Trump is a menace to the workers of the world. His tariffs and annexationist threats targeting Canada are part of a drive to establish unbridled US imperialist dominance over the Western Hemisphere, its resources and strategic territories, in preparation for war with Washington's principal rivals, first and foremost China.

In so far as the Canadian bourgeoisie opposes this agenda, it is solely from the standpoint of defending its own profits and privileges. As Carney has famously declared, Canadian imperialism will not be “on the menu” in a new era of great-power conflict, but rather will secure its “seat at the table” where the imperialist powers repartition the world through aggression and world war.

While proclaiming “we are all in this together” in opposing Trump, the ruling class, under Carney's leadership, has implemented huge swathes of Trump's socio-economic program. This includes massive military spending hikes; a “mega” corporate tax cut; a new social spending austerity drive; and “normalizing” the federal Labour Minister's newly-arrogated powers to criminalize strikes in the name of the “national interest.”

Meanwhile, Ottawa has moved to forge closer ties with Germany, France, Britain and the other European imperialist powers, based on their common interest in pursuing the NATO-instigated war with Russia to “victory,” and developing their military-industrial capabilities independent of their erstwhile American ally.

If UCP Premier Smith has played a double-game around the independence referendum, so has Carney. He has used the purported

threat of Alberta separatism to provide political cover for forming a close working partnership with Alberta's far-right government and for gutting the environmental protections governing the development of the tar sands, pipelines and other big business infrastructure projects. The Justin Trudeau Liberal government introduced many of these to help make Canada a leader in green capitalist energy production. But particularly after Trump dismantled Biden's attempt to pursue a similar strategy, such regulations and any attempt, however meagre, to combat climate change, came to be viewed by the most powerful sections of Canadian capital as an intolerable obstacle to profit-making.

It is not only in respect to energy and environmental policy that the Carney government has partnered with Smith's far-right UCP. Ottawa has also turned a blind eye to the UCP's promotion of health-care privatization in flagrant violation of the Canada Health Act.

Workers rightly appalled by the reactionary actions of the UCP government and the fascistic forces it is cultivating in the Alberta separatist movement must scrutinize the record of the left flank of the official pro-Canada campaign led by the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) and the Alberta NDP. They have opposed the UCP's dalliance with the separatist far-right from the standpoint that it is bad for corporate Canada, since the threat of secession scares away investment.

The AFL leadership has on several recent occasions invoked the threat of a “general strike,” including last October when the UCP government illegalized a public school teachers' strike. But this is no more than bluster aimed at keeping an increasingly restless rank and file under its control. Its “Alberta Fight Back Now!” campaign, which is organizing protests across the province this weekend as part of a get-out the referendum vote drive, is aimed at channeling opposition to the UCP government behind the election of an NDP government in October 2027. Led by the long-time Liberal Party-aligned former Calgary mayor Naheed Nenshi, the NDP today is, if anything, even more right-wing than when it formed the provincial government under Notley between 2015 and 2019 and imposed austerity and public sector wage “restraint,” while promoting the interests of Big Oil.

The growth of the far-right in Canada, as in the US and Europe, is the product of their deliberate cultivation by a ruling class determined to eviscerate what remains of the social concessions wrung from it in the last century through militant and revolutionary working-class struggles; and, secondly, the systematic suppression of the class struggle and imposition of capitalist restructuring and austerity by those parties and organizations that have historically claimed to be left and/or representative of the working class.

In Canada, the unions and NDP have propped up successive Liberal government under Trudeau and Carney as they have lurched sharply right. Now faced with an historic assault on workers' right to strike, they are proposing workers write their MPs and mount token demonstrations outside government MPs' offices.

If the threat from the far right is to be defeated, the working class must advance its own socialist solution to the capitalist crisis, and rally all those forces committed to the defence of democratic rights behind it employing the methods of class struggle.

The crisis of Canadian imperialism and its federal state

Whatever the outcome of the UCP's 10-question referendum, the crisis of the Canadian federal state will continue.

Earlier this month, the pro-independence Parti Québécois was returned to power as Quebec's provincial government. The PQ is committed to holding a referendum by 2030 on its plans to establish an independent

Quebec on an explicitly ethno-chauvinist, “entrepreneurial” and pro-imperialist program. Quebec’s premier elect, Paul St. Pierre Plamondon, has signalled he is ready to make common cause with Smith and her UCP in pressing for more powers from Ottawa, and has previously boasted of his “fraternal” ties with the far-right Alberta separatists.

More fundamentally, the breakdown in Canada-US relations and the crisis roiling the Canadian federation are manifestations of a global crisis rooted in the basic contradictions of capitalism, above all that between the development of an ever-more interconnected global economy and its division into rival capitalist nation-states, whose ruling elites vie to control resources, labour markets, strategic territories and production networks.

The development of a highly-integrated North American economy over the last half-century has deepened the regional conflicts that have historically characterized Canadian capitalism. They have given rise to distinct regionally-based factions of capital that have different and potentially opposed interests, as they play different roles in this continental economy.

The Trump administration, meanwhile, is seeking to exploit Canadian capitalism’s dependence on the US market and the factional divisions this dependence has fueled.

Whilst they squabble among themselves as to whose interests will come first under conditions where Canadian imperialism is being reorganized for trade war and world war, all the rival factions of the bourgeoisie are agreed that the full brunt of the economic and social crisis must be imposed on the working class.

Workers across Canada must implacably oppose all the rival ruling class camps and the rival banners behind which they seek to subordinate workers to their profit interests, from the defence of Canada and Team Canada to Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism and Alberta First regionalism and separatism.

The only answer to war, austerity, ever-deepening social inequality and authoritarianism is the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force. Workers in Canada must turn to the growing upsurge of workers in the US against Trump and the capitalist oligarchy that stands behind him and fight for the development of a unified working-class counteroffensive to establish workers’ political power and a socialist North America.



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