Results of Alberta's October 19 referendum express absence of working-class alternative to the far-right UCP, amid rising popular opposition

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Alberta's far-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government held a 10-question referendum October 19, in an effort to stoke political reaction and advance the regional-sectional interests of Alberta big business against their rivals within the Canadian ruling class.

The main popular and media focus surrounding the vote was on the tenth of the ten questions, that which asked whether Alberta should hold a binding vote on separation from Canada.

Alberta Premier Danielle Smith formally opposed Alberta's secession from the Canadian state, and in the final days of the campaign appeared at a pro-Canada rally alongside Liberal Prime Minister Mark Carney. But she and her government went to great lengths to put the independence question on the ballot.

The other nine questions, for which she and her government campaigned extensively for a Yes vote, were cut from the same reactionary cloth. They were all aimed at whipping up a far-right political climate, and fueling the struggle of Alberta big business for a bigger say in Ottawa and greater "autonomy," i.e., power to pursue socio-economic policies more explicitly tailored to its profit interests.

Alberta separatism was openly endorsed by US President Donald Trump's MAGA supporters, including Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and billionaire Elon Musk. They agree with the UCP's social attacks on immigrants and the broader working class.

They also view the stoking of regional divisions, which have been exacerbated by the US-Canada trade war, as advancing Trump's interrelated goals of crashing Canada's economy and annexing it as the 51st state. Trump's "America First" policy demands unchallenged hegemony for US imperialism over the western hemisphere's resources in preparation for war to maintain its global preeminence against China.

Mass opposition across Canada to Trump's trade war tariffs and annexation threats found expression in the referendum results. Alberta independence was decisively rejected, with 75.5 percent voting to remain in Canada. In Edmonton, 86 percent voted to remain, and in Calgary 83 percent. Support for separation was concentrated in rural Alberta, including communities hit by Big Oil's post-2014 drive to boost profits by slashing conventional drilling, which has eliminated some 50,000 oil-related jobs.

Smith has to date advocated for greater autonomy for Alberta within Canada, while simultaneously demanding more influence over national policy. She has repeatedly visited Trump and his allies in the US, and held out the prospect of striking separate economic arrangements with Washington to benefit the oil-exporting province. In calling the referendum, she hoped to leverage the separatist movement in Alberta and its supporters in and around the Trump administration to strengthen her hand in bargaining with other sections of the Canadian bourgeoisie and Ottawa. For decades, going back to the emergence of the Reform Party, the push for western regional and Alberta First autonomy has helped shift Canadian politics sharply to the right.

Anti-immigrant chauvinism

The referendum continued this reactionary tradition. The UCP government's first five referendum questions were aimed at whipping up anti-immigrant chauvinism, scapegoating the lowest-paid and most vulnerable workers for the crisis of a profit-driven economy, and manufacturing a facade of popular legitimacy for stripping them of their rights.

The remaining five questions, including the question on separatism, were aimed at dismantling the legal-constitutional and fiscal framework by which the federal government guarantees minimum national standards in public health care and other essential services; further weakening environmental protections; and enhancing the ability of Alberta big business and their far-right allies to defy and thwart federal legislation and policies with which they disagree.

Arrayed against the UCP in the official debate was the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) and its allies in the Carney government at the federal level. Both promote "Team Canada" nationalism in the trade war against Trump to cover over the class-war agenda being pursued by the entire ruling class against all workers. Across all provinces and at the federal level, the ruling class has waged a sustained attack on workers' democratic and social rights for decades, and is rapidly reorganizing the economy for rearmament and war.

Underlining the right-wing character of this alliance, former NDP Premier Rachel Notley toured the province campaigning for a "No" vote alongside former federal Conservative cabinet minister and UCP Premier Jason Kenney. Former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, under whom Kenney served, also endorsed the "pro-Canada," "No" campaign.

The first five anti-immigrant questions all passed, but only narrowly. The vote was carried by rural areas, where support ranged from 66 to 72 percent. In Calgary and Edmonton, where the vast majority of immigrants live and work, voters opposed the restrictions, with support ranging from just 43 to 49 percent.

Question one proposed increased provincial control over immigration,

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which would tether quotas even more closely to the labour needs of big business while denying the recruited workers their elementary social rights. Question two proposed restricting provincially-funded services to citizens, permanent residents, and other "Alberta-approved" statuses, barring refugee claimants, temporary foreign workers, and other non-permanent residents from publicly funded health care and social services.

Question three proposed a 12-month minimum delay before new residents qualify for social supports—a direct attack on the most precarious workers. Question four, in violation of Section 15 (Equality Rights) of the Charter, proposed health and education fees for non-permanent residents, a premium that could reach $1,900 annually according to Smith.

Through its "Alberta is Calling" campaign, the UCP itself recruited migrant workers to fill labour shortages, and is now scheming to withdraw from them the most elementary support.

Smith's claim that temporary residents cost the province $1 billion annually, which is "not sustainable," is a lie. University of Calgary economist Gillian Petit estimates that temporary residents paid at least $835 million in provincial and federal taxes in 2025, while the province's own calculations attribute just over $400 million in "direct costs" to them.

Because they are overwhelmingly younger and must pass medical screenings to enter Canada, temporary residents account for just 1.27 percent of provincial health spending. The entire campaign is a fabrication designed to scapegoat a group of workers that makes up just 5.8 percent of Alberta's population—for the very real crisis in health care and education resulting from decades of capitalist austerity.

Question five proposed proof of citizenship to vote, and passed with 58.06 percent. Voting is already restricted to Canadian citizens, and Elections Alberta describes voter fraud as exceptionally rare. The question, which clearly was inspired by Trump's fascist anti-immigrant incitement, was designed to manufacture a case for voter "fraud" among newcomers, refugees, and low-income people who may lack proof of citizenship—and to impose anti-democratic control over the electoral process ahead of the 2027 election.

The hypocrisy of blaming immigrants for the supposed lack of money in a province that hands out massive subsidies to and maintains the lowest tax rates for corporations and the rich in the country is plain for all to see.

But the fact such reactionary appeals are capable of securing majority support is above all an indictment of the so-called "progressive" or "left" parties, like the provincial and federal NDP, the federal Liberals, and the trade union bureaucracy. They have adapted to and embraced the right's anti-immigrant chauvinism over recent years, with Ottawa going so far as to hand refugees over to Trump's fascistic ICE thugs and dramatically slash immigration quotas.

Moreover, the claims that society's resources are stretched and cannot fund decent public services are lies. All of the parties, regardless of which side they campaigned on in the referendum, back the Carney Liberal government spending tens of billions on waging war and rearmament, and further enriching big business with massive tax cuts, subsidies, and government-backed infrastructure projects.

The NDP, Liberals, and trade unions in particular champion "Team Canada," in which workers are ordered to make "sacrifices" so the profits of the financial oligarchy can be protected in the reactionary trade war with the US. The foul Canadian nationalism that accompanies these policies fuels a climate in which anti-immigrant chauvinism can gain ground.

Whipping up "Alberta First" regionalism

While question 10 on Alberta separatism was roundly defeated, the other four questions directly related to the province's constitutional position within the federal state came much closer to passing. Questions six through nine were intended to rally support behind the Alberta government's demands for enhanced powers within the federation: provincial selection of King's Bench and Appeal court judges; abolition of the federal Senate; Alberta's right to opt out of federal social programs with full financial compensation; and provincial law taking precedence over conflicting federal laws.

The goal of this provincialist autonomy agenda, backed by much of the regional bourgeoisie, is the evisceration of all regulatory restraints on capital and the intensification of a reactionary fiscal regime—ever more stripped-down social spending and ultra-low taxes for big business and the most affluent—the so-called "Alberta advantage."

Overall, the constitutional and fiscal questions were narrowly rejected, with 52.6 to 58 percent voting against. In the predominantly rural regions outside Edmonton and Calgary, they passed with modest majorities ranging from 59 to 62 percent in favour; support in the two cities was much lower, at 32 to 37 percent. Implicit in the overall rejection is the recognition among sections of workers that these measures would lead to a gutting of their pensions and social programs and the undermining of legal protections.

But the very fact that the UCP came close to winning majorities is an indictment of the "progressive" political establishment, and the unions and NDP in particular. The latter have systematically suppressed the class struggle and connived in the imposition of sweeping attacks on the living standards and social rights of working people for more than four decades.

It is this that has created conditions in which the far right can misdirect social anger over growing economic insecurity and social inequality.

The overwhelming rejection of Alberta separatism is a genuine expression of popular opposition to the far right in Alberta and its fascist enablers in the White House. But the working class will find no way forward in the struggle for its democratic and social rights by lending its support to the Canadian federal state and the imperialist bourgeoisie that stands behind it.

When it held power between 2015 and 2019 under Rachel Notley, the NDP championed Big Oil, and imposed funding freezes in health care and education—a record that paved the way for the hard-right UCP to take power.

Under Naheed Nenshi, a long-time Liberal Party-aligned former Calgary mayor, the provincial NDP has consolidated its pro-oil, pro-austerity character, formally "delinking" from the federal NDP to protect its endorsement of the Pacific Link pipeline—the latest expression of the party's longstanding subservience to the federal Liberals and Big Oil.

The Alberta Federation of Labour leadership, which invoked the threat of a "general strike" last October when the UCP illegalized a province-wide teachers' strike but organized nothing, is using its "Alberta Fight Back Now!" campaign to channel opposition to the UCP behind the election of an NDP government in October 2027.

Meanwhile, the federal Liberal government under Mark Carney is implementing Trump-style policies—"mega" corporate tax cuts, social spending cuts, and a law "normalizing" the power to arbitrarily criminalize strikes. Ottawa has turned a blind eye to the UCP's health-care privatization in flagrant violation of the Canada Health Act and is planning to cut the Canada Health Transfer from a five to three percent increase in 2028.

Carney has used the threat of separatism as political cover for a close working partnership with Smith's far-right government—above all on the gutting of environmental protections on the tar sands and the fast-tracking of the Pacific Link Pipeline—critical to his government's plans to position Canada as an "energy superpower."

In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, Carney announced his

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government was ready to discuss with Smith Alberta's proposals to restrict immigration and deny "non-Alberta approved" immigrants their right to public services.

This partnership is what gives Smith a free hand to proceed with her attacks. Smith has reaffirmed the UCP's commitment to opting out of the national pharmacare plan and the federal dental plan, used by some 350,000 Albertans, mostly low-income people and children. Smith is using the narrow "Yes" vote on the anti-immigrant questions to demand a chauvinistic Quebec-style deal with Ottawa that would create a second tier of workers, and has stated that Albertans will need proof of citizenship to vote next year.

As the WSWS perspective on the overwhelming rejection of Alberta separatism in the referendum explained, "As Canadian imperialism rearms and restructures class relations for trade war and global war, the conflicts among regionally based ruling class factions will only sharpen. Where they are united is in placing the full burden of the crisis on the working class, gutting democratic rights and stoking reaction, above all, anti-immigrant chauvinism."

Workers must reject the xenophobia of the far right, which blames immigrants for a crisis produced by capitalism itself; and mount an industrial and political counteroffensive against all the rival sections of the ruling class.

To mobilize its social power, the working class must forge its political independence from all the rival factions of the bourgeoisie. This includes implacably opposing all its various federal and regional representatives and their various nationalist and regionalist appeals—from Carney and his Liberals and their NDP allies to the UCP, the Alberta separatists and the pro-independence Parti Québécois.

Forging the fighting unity of immigrant, migrant, and native-born workers in Alberta and throughout Canada, the US, and Mexico is pivotal to the fight for workers' power and a socialist North America.

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