

Right-wing populist Doug Ford wins Ontario's election

By Keith Jones
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Setting the stage for a rapid intensification of class conflict, the right-wing populist Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservatives secured a strong parliamentary majority in Thursday's Ontario election. With 40.5 percent of the popular vote, the Conservatives won 76 of the 124 seats in the Ontario legislature.

The Liberals, who since 2003 have governed the province that is home to almost four in every ten Canadians, suffered an historic defeat. They won just seven seats, one less than needed for official party status in the Ontario legislature, and garnered 19.6 percent of the vote, an almost 20 percentage-point drop from their 38.6 percent vote-share in the 2014 provincial election.

The social-democratic NDP, which has been an also-ran in Ontario elections for the past two decades, increased its share of the popular vote by 10 percentage points to 33.6 percent. It captured 40 seats, a gain of 17 from what it would have won in 2014 had the current electoral boundaries been in force, and will now form the Official Opposition.

The NDP made gains in Hamilton, London, St. Catharines and Kitchener—industrial cities which have lost tens of thousands of better-paid manufacturing jobs since the turn of the century—and in northern Ontario, an impoverished region dominated by mining and forestry. It also picked-up seats in poorer, inner-city areas of Toronto and Ottawa.

The Conservatives swept rural southern Ontario and, with the exception of Brampton, the Toronto suburbs. They also won seats in the City of Toronto, where 2.7 million people live, for the first time since 1999. Ford was previously a Toronto city councilor and his younger brother, the late Rob Ford, was the city's mayor from 2010–14.

All three parties made calibrated and hypocritical appeals to mounting popular anger over rampant social inequality and mounting economic insecurity.

After years of collaborating in imposing austerity—the NDP propped up a minority Liberal government for two-and-a-half years ending in June 2014—both self-avowed “progressive” parties trumpeted calls for increased social spending, including rival plans to hike student aid and

expand drug and dental coverage for the less-well off.

Ford, for his part, promised to cut gasoline prices and electricity bills, end “hallway medicine” (a reference to overcrowded hospitals), and inject hundreds of millions into mental health. He coupled these populist appeals with pledges to reduce taxes, especially for business and the upper middle-class, slash government “red tape” (i.e., environmental and workplace regulations), cut \$6 billion per year in provincial spending, and scrap next January's \$1 per hour increase in the minimum wage. But unlike Tim Hudak, the Tory leader in the 2014 election who said he would eliminate 100,000 public sector jobs, Ford repeatedly claimed his spending cuts would cost not a single worker his or her job.

A millionaire businessman who inherited his wealth from his father, himself a Conservative Ontario legislator, Ford postured Trump-style as the candidate of the “people.” He was the plain-speaking representative of the “hard-working Joe” fighting the “corrupt” downtown Toronto “elite.”

In his rambling Thursday night victory speech, Ford trotted out conservative and right-wing populist catch phrases. He declared Ontario “open for business,” said “the party with the taxpayers' money is over,” and vowed to head a government that “will reduce your taxes, reduce your gas prices” and “always put you first.”

The popular repudiation of the Ontario Liberals is a body blow to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his federal Liberal government. Not only was the Kathleen Wynne Liberal government Trudeau's closest provincial ally. Much of his government's modus operandi, including its close working relationship with the trade union bureaucracy and relentless promotion of identity politics, was modeled after the Liberal governments of Wynne and her predecessor, Dalton McGuinty.

More importantly, the new government will quickly come into headlong conflict with the working class, as the ruling elite uses it to push politics in Ontario and across Canada still further right.

The Ford Conservative government will assume office in

the midst of a systemic crisis of world capitalism, punctuated by an anemic and increasingly fragile recovery from the steepest slump since the Great Depression; the resurgence of great-power military-strategic conflict; and trade war.

During the five-and-half years Kathleen Wynne led the Ontario Liberal government, it imposed sweeping social spending cuts, slashed corporate taxes, carried out the country's largest privatization in a generation (Hydro One), and used anti-strike laws to police austerity. Yet big business soured on Wynne and her Liberals, particularly during the last year, when in an attempt to avert an electoral debacle they made a feint left, raising the minimum wage and outlawing zero-hour contracts.

In the run-up to Thursday's vote, leading corporate executives issued shrill warnings that Trump's tax handouts to big business have placed Canada's "competitiveness" at risk. Meanwhile, the entire corporate media, from the liberal *Toronto Star* to the neo-conservative *National Post*, castigated all three parties for failing to promise balanced budgets.

Significantly, Ford responded to Trump's imposition of tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum imports, by calling for an intensification of the class war assault on the working class. "We must work domestically to make Ontario and Canada more competitive," tweeted Ford, "Only a (Conservative) government will create the business-friendly environment that is needed to bring jobs back to Ontario."

The Conservatives have pledged to immediately order a "full... outside" audit of the government's books. This is a by now familiar ploy used by capitalist governments of all stripes. It provides Ford with a mechanism to declare Ontario's fiscal situation even more precarious than thought and a pretext to impose draconian public service cuts.

The working class will bitterly resist the ruling class attempt to destroy what remains of the social rights it won through the mass struggles of the last century and do so as part of a growing rebellion of the working class in the US and around the world.

But to mount a successful counter-offensive, workers in Ontario and Canada must break free of the political and organizational grip of the pro-capitalist trade unions and NDP, and advance their own solution to the capitalist crisis—the fight for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of society.

At the NDP's main post-election rally, party leader Andrea Horwath said the social democrats would be the "voice" for the people of Ontario who "did not vote for cuts."

Ontario Federation of Labour President Chris Buckley later claimed, "The labour movement will hold Doug Ford's

feet to the fire," while Jerry Dias, the president of Unifor, Canada's largest industrial union, said the premier-elect will "be very surprised" if "he thinks that the result of this election is a carte-blanche to wage attacks on workers and unleash cuts to public services."

All this is bluster, aimed at positioning the unions and NDP to contain and politically derail working class opposition to the Ford government and ensure it does not become a threat to capitalist rule.

The NDP is a pro-war, pro-austerity party and like social-democratic and labour parties around the world utterly subservient to big business. If it was relegated to third-party status for a generation in Ontario, it was because the only NDP government in the province's history, that headed by Bob Rae between 1990–95, cruelly betrayed the hopes of working people, slashing public services and imposing a wage- and job-cutting "social contract."

As for the unions, they were close allies of the big business Liberal government in Ontario throughout its 15 years in office, just as they are currently partnering with the federal Trudeau government.

This reactionary alliance was born of the unions' suppression of the mass working-class challenge to Ontario's last Conservative government and its Common Sense Revolution, a Reagan-Thatcher style program of savage cuts to public and social services. Between 1995 and 1997, hundreds of thousands of workers joined demonstrations and one-day strikes against the Mike Harris Conservative government. But when the opposition movement threatened to escape the unions' control and a province-wide illegal teachers' strike posed the need for a political general strike aimed at driving the Tories from office, the unions shut the movement down.

Soon after, the Canadian Auto Workers (Unifor's predecessor) and other unions began forging close tie with the Liberals and promoting "strategic voting" as a tactic to defeat the Tories.

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