

Right-wing populist United Conservatives win Alberta election as NDP vote plummets

By Roger Jordan
20 April 2019

The right-wing populist United Conservative Party (UCP) led by former federal cabinet minister Jason Kenney swept to power in Tuesday's provincial election in Alberta, securing 63 out of the legislature's 87 seats.

This result was principally the outcome of popular opposition to the right-wing record of the province's one-term New Democratic Party (NDP) government, and the recent, big business-promoted unification of Alberta's right-wing parties, the Progressive Conservatives and Wildrose, under the UCP banner.

The coming to power of the UCP will be used to push not just Alberta, but Canadian establishment politics as a whole still further right. At the same time, the triumph of the "Albert First" UCP will intensify regional tensions within the Canadian ruling class and its federal state.

While posturing as a fighter for the little guy ravaged by the crisis wracking the province's energy sector, Kenney pledged to slash taxes and regulations for big business and impose a four-year government spending freeze. Appeals to Alberta and western regionalism and to anti-Quebec chauvinism were also central to the UCP campaign.

The corporate media has been quick to claim that the UCP was swept to power by a groundswell of support for its reactionary agenda. This is a lie aimed at delegitimizing the resistance that will soon emerge within the working class to the government's austerity measures.

Despite overwhelmingly favourable media coverage and the quasi-unanimous support of the province's corporate elite, Kenney only won a modest gain in votes as compared with the combined total taken by the Progressive Conservatives and Wildrose parties in 2015. In that election, which brought an end to 44 years of Progressive Conservative rule, the PCs took 27.8 percent of the vote, while Wildrose secured 24.2 percent, for an overall total of 52 percent. This time around, Kenney's UCP received the backing of 55 percent of voters. In overall terms, this equated to an increase of a little more than 100,000 votes.

The UCP's large parliamentary majority is attributable to the 8 percentage-point drop in support for the trade

union-backed NDP. The NDP's share of the vote fell from 40.6 percent in 2015 to 32.1 percent. Five cabinet ministers lost their seats, as the party's representation in the legislature dropped by more than half from 54 to 24 seats.

The NDP secured a surprise victory in 2015 by posing as the defender of working people against Alberta's multi-billion dollar oil industry, and by capitalizing on widespread hostility towards the corrupt, pro-corporate Tory government. In the 2015 campaign, NDP leader Rachel Notley pledged to increase taxes on the oil companies, invest more in social services, and enforce tougher environmental standards on the province's tar sands oil producers.

These promises all proved to be worthless. As Premier, Notley and her NDP maintained the so-called "Alberta advantage" of ultra-low taxes for the corporations and super rich; imposed capitalist austerity, including public sector wage freezes and cuts to education and healthcare; and stoked its own form of Alberta regionalism. This reached a high-point when Notley threatened to temporarily block oil shipments to British Columbia in protest of the BC NDP government's subsequently abandoned pledge to oppose the expansion of the Trans Mountain oil pipeline, which will significantly increase the amount of untreated bitumen sent from Alberta to the BC coast.

As a result of these right-wing, anti-worker policies, the way was left open for Kenney and the UCP to pose as friends of ordinary, hard-working Albertans who are suffering, or so the story goes, due to the NDP's climate change policies, refusal to stand up to the Trudeau Liberals, and its restrictions on the "creative potential" of big business. The NDP's defeat had long been predicted in the polls, with Kenney's UCP enjoying a double digit lead for months.

In his victory speech Tuesday night, Kenney made clear he would lead a hard-right government committed to attacking the working class, defending corporate interests, and whipping up Alberta First regionalism. In line with Ontario's right-wing populist Premier Doug Ford, who has

cut billions from public spending during his first year in power, Kenney declared Alberta “open for business.” “There is a deep frustration in this province, a sense that we have contributed massively to the rest of Canada, but that everywhere we turn we are being blocked in and pinned down,” claimed Kenney. “Today we begin to fight back.”

The UCP’s victory is not a simple return to traditional Conservative rule in Alberta, as media outlets like the *Toronto Star* have suggested. Following Ford’s election victory last June and the coming to power of the Coalition Avenir Quebec in Quebec in October, the UCP’s victory marks a further turn to the right in Canadian bourgeois politics.

The party’s ties to far-right and outright fascistic forces are well-documented, including the close ties of leading UCP members to the far-right, pro-Trump news outlet Rebel Media. Representatives of the white supremacist Soldiers of Odin have also appeared at several UCP events in recent months. Additionally, UCP members were prominent participants in the far-right protests held in several Alberta towns and cities late last year under the banner of the “Yellow Vests Canada,” which demanded the federal Liberal government reject the UN Refugee Pact, deport refugees, and strengthen Canada’s borders.

On a whole range of issues, from taxation policy and social spending to tailoring immigration even more closely to the needs of big business, Kenney will be at one with Ford and Quebec Premier François Legault in pressing for the intensification of the class war assault on the working class.

The defeat of Notley’s NDP, which aligned itself closely with the Trudeau government, including in the push for oil pipelines, will further weaken the federal Liberals ahead of this fall’s federal elections.

Heeding big business demands for a more aggressive assertion of Canadian imperialist interests on the world stage and against the working class at home, the Trudeau government has lurched further right over the past six months, illegalizing the postal workers strike, further reducing corporate taxes, assisting the US regime-change drive in Venezuela, and attacking the rights of refugees.

Kenney’s “Alberta First” tirade on election night underscored that his government will champion the demands of Alberta big business for policy changes at the expense of rival sections of the ruling class, thereby intensifying the regional tensions within Canadian capitalist politics which have been exacerbated in recent decades by the globalization of production.

Kenney’s attacks on other provinces, particularly Quebec, reflect long-standing frustrations among Alberta’s oil barons over federal-provincial fiscal arrangements, energy

and other policies. Alberta’s energy corporations are angered at Ottawa’s failure to ram through the construction of new pipelines to tidal water, under conditions in which the shale oil and gas boom in the United States has undermined Alberta’s main oil market and turned the US into a direct competitor.

The attacks on other provinces are bound up with the UCP’s right-wing drive to decimate what little remains of federal social spending and welfare programs and privatize healthcare and other public services.

This finds expression in the party’s hostility towards equalization, the system under which Ottawa provides funds to provinces with a per capita income lower than the national average. Due to the multi-billion dollar profits of Alberta’s energy sector, which have overwhelmingly benefited the province’s super-rich and corporate elite, Alberta has for decades been a “net loser” from equalization to Quebec and the Atlantic provinces. Kenney has demagogically pledged to hold a referendum on equalization, which he will use to agitate for radical changes to the constitutionally-mandated program, if not its abolition. The goal of any renegotiation would be to gut any national standards for public services like healthcare and pave the way for their wholesale privatization.

Along similar lines, the UCP’s election platform calls for the conversion of federal social and healthcare transfers into tax points, which would enable Alberta and other provinces to escape federal limits on healthcare privatization and rapidly undermine the ability of poorer provinces to maintain existing levels of public health insurance coverage.

Kenney is also virulently opposed to the federal Liberals’ Environmental Assessment Bill (C-69), which includes certain very limited environmental provisions as concessions to secure support from First Nations leaders for resource development projects. Instead, the UCP wants to give the oil corporations a free hand to press ahead with pipeline and resource exploration projects, regardless of the environmental and social costs.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>