

How the British Columbia NDP government's anti-worker record facilitated the rise of the far-right BC Conservatives

Douglas Stewart
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The outcome of last Sunday's provincial election in British Columbia remains unclear, with the counting of 65,000 mail-in ballots and recounts only expected to conclude October 28. The current interim results show the British Columbia New Democrats, who have held power in Victoria for seven years, capturing 46 seats with a 44.7 percent share of the popular vote, and the far-right BC Conservatives taking 45 seats and a 43.7 percent vote-share. The Greens won two seats, the same number they held in the previous legislature, but saw their share of the popular vote almost halved, falling from 15.1 percent to 8.2 percent.

Since 47 seats are required for a majority in the 93-member provincial legislature, no party will be able to govern without the support of another if the current results hold. Although the Greens propped up a minority NDP government between 2017 and 2020, they have thus far refused to confirm their readiness to do so again and have left the door open to backing the far-right Conservatives.

The question that immediately arises, irrespective of any changes to the seat-totals due to further ballot counting, is how could a far-right party, full of racists "Freedom" Convoy supporters, climate-change deniers, and fascists, secure such a strong showing? And in a province riven by social inequality, with homelessness, chronic poverty and a rampant opioid crisis dominating one side of the social divide, and a booming housing market and energy sector fattening the bank accounts of the wealthy few. The BC Conservative Party was only constituted in its current form in late August, when the head of the BC United, the successor organization to the BC Liberals, announced he was closing the party down and urging all its members and supporters to vote for the Conservatives.

The key to answering this question is the anti-worker, right-wing record of the New Democrats in BC and nationally, which has turned broad masses of workers against them and left some of the most disoriented and backward layers believing that a vote for John Rustad's BC Conservatives is an anti-establishment vote. This is far from the case. Should the recounts propel Rustad to the premiership, he will serve as a close ally of far-right demagogue Pierre Poilievre, who has been embraced by much of Canada's ruling elite as their prime minister in waiting, and would intensify the Liberal government's class war agenda of austerity and war.

The BC NDP's record has been characterized by fiscal austerity, following in the footsteps of the BC Liberal governments that ruled the province from 2001 to 2017. It has also included determined efforts to suppress the class struggle through their allies in the trade union bureaucracy, a vicious "profits before life" pandemic policy that led to thousands of deaths, and the abandonment of half-hearted promises to tackle BC's social problems. Beyond the province, the BC NDP government, like the federal party, has served as one of the closest allies of the Trudeau Liberal government as it has placed Canadian imperialism at the forefront of US-led imperialist wars around the world, massively

boosted military spending, gutted workers' rights, and slashed public spending.

The 2017 provincial election and the minority NDP government

During the 2017 election campaign, the NDP issued a few token promises to appeal to popular hostility to the BC Liberals. They promised to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, although not until 2021, and at a time when the estimated living wage in Vancouver was already \$20 per hour. They also pledged to build 114,000 new social housing units in a decade, although they were vague about what this housing would consist of and how much it would cost to rent. After coming to power, they heralded increases to spending on healthcare and education but were insistent on retaining the fiscal framework left behind by the Liberals and learning to "live within our means," according to then NDP Premier John Horgan.

The confidence-and-supply agreement between the Greens and the NDP to secure the NDP's governing majority in the legislature completely abandoned the NDP's insufficient promises to reduce the drastic social inequality plaguing BC. The agreement made vague statements of intent to invest in education and healthcare, but the NDP promise to raise taxes on the wealthiest in the province was abandoned, as was their pledge to increase the corporate tax rate by 1 percent. The NDP also junked the 114,000 units of new social housing they had trumpeted during the election campaign. The agreement merely stated that the two parties would work together to make "housing more affordable by increasing supply of affordable housing and take action to deal with the speculation and fraud that is driving up prices." The slippery term "affordable" is one that numerous governments have utilized to make promises while doing nothing of substance.

The new NDP minority government's quick rightward lurch was further reflected in its first Throne Speech. While stating again and again that they would work for "people," it failed to mention anything to do with "housing affordability," the laughably inadequate \$400 one-time renters' rebate, or the badly needed \$10/day daycare.

The NDP also turned their back on the lowest wage workers, stating during the Throne Speech that they would now only establish a Fair Wages Commission to investigate raising the minimum wage with a goal of \$15 at some undefined time in the future. The incoming Labour Minister, Harry Bains, a former union bureaucrat, was happy to take this hands-off approach and agreed with the Green Party that the government "should not be prescriptive of the Fair Wages Commission." He

continued, bowing to the province's capitalists, insisting, "We should give [the FWC] the authority and mandate to decide when we reach \$15, and how we reach \$15." The FWC was set up and peopled with a business professor, an economist for the Business Council of BC, and a senior United Food and Commercial Workers union bureaucrat—the perfect trio to ensure that the "fight for \$15" would not threaten the profitability of businesses reliant on the lowest-cost labour.

As would be expected, given the incestuous ties between the union bureaucracy and the NDP, the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL) celebrated BC's new "progressive" government. After the "gender-balanced" cabinet was sworn in, BCFL President Irene Lanzinger heralded this "new era" in which government "will act to deal with the real issues facing working people." After the Throne Speech, the BCFL congratulated the government for their "new approach that puts people first." The BCFL, like the province's other unions, was on board with the planned austerity under the cover of "social justice" rhetoric and a heavy dose of identity politics.

The NDP budget modestly increased public health and education spending, but it was far too little to even begin to make up for 16 years of massive austerity. The government also budgeted a billion dollars, over three years, to create 22,000 new childcare spaces in a province where more than half a million children lived amid a mere 100,000 licensed spots. They also planned to spend \$1.6 billion for "affordable housing" over three years. Nothing of substance was done to reduce the egregious poverty rate, let alone tackle the opioid epidemic, or the increasing numbers of homeless.

The fact that there was no bold action was not due to the demands of the Green Party pulling the NDP to the right, as many of the NDP's pseudo-left apologists asserted. It was the NDP following the same "fiscally responsible" low tax/austerity agenda as social democratic parties the world over during the past four decades, which has resulted in them becoming virtually indistinguishable from their explicitly right-wing bourgeois rivals.

A press release from the Minister of Finance, Carole James, insisted the NDP government would maintain the "fiscal prudence that marks BC as an economic leader" to ensure "a strong, sustainable economy for all British Columbians." Indeed, the Lower Mainland's corporate digest, *Business in Vancouver* grudgingly acknowledged that "this could have just as easily been a budget under the previous government."

From 2017 to 2020, Premier Horgan and his party demonstrated that they had learned from the success of Canada's federal Liberal Party and Prime Minister Trudeau. Sticking to rigid fiscal discipline, they sought to conceal their right-wing agenda through the promotion of identity politics based on gender and ethnicity. The social democratic politicians, their PR people, and the NDP's union backers spoke continually about working for the welfare of the people and the good of all British Columbians. Their actions, however, repeatedly demonstrated that their primary concern was serving the interests of the capitalist class.

The NDP's profits-over-lives pandemic policy

Canada's ruling elite embraced a pro-corporate response to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people. While this homicidal course was backed by governments of all political stripes, Horgan's BC NDP administration stood out for its cavalier dismissal of the threat of COVID-19 and its refusal to follow basic science.

In mid-March, as other jurisdictions in Canada and globally were beginning to impose lockdowns as infections grew, the BC NDP

government refused to order a shelter-in place policy. They banned gatherings of over 50, while exempting many businesses as supposedly essential services to ensure the flow of profits, thereby placing many workers in danger. The BC government eventually ordered a lockdown, but major exceptions for businesses, especially the province's lucrative resource industries, remained.

As early as April 17, 2020, Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry was heralding the province's success in flattening the curve and claiming that the health care system was coping well. As public health experts insisted that the pandemic was not over and called for the use of high-quality N-95 masks, Dr. Henry refused to implement mask mandates, arguing that their use would stigmatize those not wearing them.

As Dr. Henry would acknowledge in November 2020, her position was aimed at staying on board with the NDP's desired policy prescriptions. These were of course focused on doing as little as possible by way of public health measures lest they disrupt the functioning of the capitalist economy. In line with this, as evidence to the contrary piled up, Dr. Henry continued to deny the virus was airborne and thus far more dangerous than a virus spread only through droplets spread by speaking, coughing and sneezing. Corporations and business owners needed to get consumers out and spending again, and needed workers back toiling so they might extract profits from their labour.

The NDP government insisted children return to school in September 2020; and they refused to let teachers open windows for ventilation. While tens of thousands of debt-crushed workers found themselves unemployed, the government provided a single \$1,000 payment to workers laid off on top of the federal government's meagre COVID relief benefit. Meanwhile, both levels of government provided billions and billions of rescue loans, tax breaks, reductions in royalties and other subsidies to ensure the working class alone paid for the pandemic.

From the beginning of COVID, the NDP and its provincial health team did all they could to obscure the reality that with each subsequent wave, more and more people were getting infected, reinfected, developing Long-COVID, and dying. BC tested lower numbers of people than most Canadian provinces. BC was one of the first provinces to stop reporting daily numbers of infections and deaths, quickly moving to increasingly stage-managed press conferences on a weekly basis before cancelling these altogether. Early on in the pandemic, even when they were still reporting daily numbers, Dr. Henry's team became infamous for their poor data and statistical manipulations. Data manipulation was so widespread that some researchers have argued based on excess mortality numbers that BC's true COVID death toll might be double the official figure of almost 5,500.

The 2020 election and the NDP's majority government

In late September 2020, as British Columbians were still reeling under the first wave of COVID-19, and seven months before an election was required, the NDP called a snap election for the 24th of October. In an indication of just how effective the NDP had been during its first three years in power at defending the interests of the corporate elite, including with its profits-before-lives pandemic policy, the party received an endorsement ahead of the vote from the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of Bay Street's financial oligarchy.

During the election campaign, the NDP's union backers came out to support them as the "only choice" for working people. Unifor President Jerry Dias stated that Premier Horgan was "the right leader to help navigate British Columbians through challenging times." And a union press release proclaimed that the NDP's proposed future policies offered

“a vision for BC’s future that leaves no one behind.”

The *Globe* editorial endorsing the NDP provided a far more honest appraisal of the situation, stating that Horgan had “governed well,” and was an economic centrist who would “keep a steady hand on the wheel.” The *Globe* noted with apparent confidence that even in the COVID-induced recession, the NDP would have to adhere to a “plan of only modest increases in spending.”

As COVID continued to rage, the NDP was faced with several public sector union agreements expiring in 2022. The government partnered with the union bureaucracies to impose sell-out contracts.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in November of 2022:

BC’s trade union bureaucracies have engaged in a perfidious, coordinated attempt to force austerity and continued unsafe working conditions onto almost 400,000 public sector workers ever since collective agreements began expiring in the spring. At every point, the goal of the BCGEU, BCTF, CUPE and others was to prevent a unified struggle by all workers against the bureaucrats’ friends ... in the pro-austerity, pro-corporate NDP government.

The BC General Employees Union (BCGEU), representing mainly provincial employees, ignored a massive strike mandate. Despite 95 percent of 30,000 workers voting to strike, the union leadership insisted that it was in their members’ best interest to work for a negotiated settlement with the government. The union bureaucracy ignored the overwhelming evidence that their drastically overworked and underpaid members were ready to fight because the collective bargaining process ensures their privileges.

The other union bureaucracies were equally complicit in imposing sell-out, real-wage-cutting contracts amid raging inflation. Rather than calling out their members to support the BCGEU employees in their willingness to stand up and fight for the improved living and working conditions they needed, these bureaucrats lined up to work with the government to sabotage their members’ struggles. The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF), Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), and the Hospital Employees’ Union (HEU), all of whose members had been on the front lines of COVID, pushed contracts on their respective members full of concessions, below inflation wage increases, and without the sorely needed improvements to their work environments.

Suppressing the class struggle went hand in hand with the NDP’s full support for the federal Liberal government, which was dependent from March 2022 on a confidence-and-supply agreement with the federal NDP. This included unflinching support for Canada’s major role in the US/NATO war on Russia and Ottawa’s support for Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians. In February 2024, BC Post-Secondary Education Minister Selina Robinson was forced to resign amid a public outcry for her having drawn on the most vile traditions of Zionism to proclaim her support for the genocide. British Palestine, where 2 million Palestinians were living prior to the creation of Israel, was, according to Robinson, “a crappy piece of land with nothing on it.”

The systematic suppression of the class struggle through the combined efforts of the NDP and its union allies, on top of years of NDP-imposed austerity, handed the initiative to the most right-wing forces. Rustad and the BC Conservatives, who had not had an elected member in the BC legislature for more than half a century, were catapulted in a matter of a few weeks into a position where they are directly challenging for power. Regardless of the outcome of the recount and government-formation talks in the coming days and weeks, this experience has once again underscored the urgency of the working class settling accounts with the bankrupt New

Democrats and their accomplices in the union bureaucracy, and establishing their political independence by breaking with the Liberal/union/NDP alliance. This requires the development of a mass movement against this alliance’s class war agenda of austerity and war, which must be taken forward through the building of new organizations of class struggle, rank-and-file committees and a revolutionary workers’ party, and the adoption of a socialist and internationalist program.



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