

“A VISCOUSLY ANTI-WORKER GOVERNMENT”

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The speculation about how a Harper majority government would act is over. One year into its mandate, it is proving to be the most viciously anti-worker Federal government in living memory. When Stephen Harper urged the G20 leaders to impose austerity instead of fixing the global financial system, he was deadly serious.

The 2012 omnibus budget bill contains scores of items that have nothing to do with budgets. They include sweeping changes to Employment Insurance, eroding environmental protection, tying foreign aid to Canadian mining interests, and scrapping the federal fair wage policy. Thousands of federal jobs are to be cut, and the entire state apparatus put at the service of corporate Canada.

New EI regulations will create three tiers of recipients, many of whom will be forced to accept jobs at 30% lower wages and travel extensively in order not to be disqualified. The entire system of Boards of Referees is being scrapped, replacing experts drawn from labour and management with just 39 single adjudicators to hear appeals across Canada. There are six jobless Canadians for every available job, and youth unemployment stands at 14%, but Finance Minister Flaherty insists the solution is for people to lower their standards and work for less.

In the past year, the Conservatives have quickly legislated away workers rights in labour disputes with both public and private employers like Air Canada and CP Rail. This pattern of undermining of collective bargaining has become the new reality. So too has the use of foreign temporary workers, now to be fast-tracked into jobs paying 15% below the prevailing wage.

Harper is determined to raise the retirement age to 67 – starting with Old Age Security. No one doubts that without a massive fight 67 will soon become the norm for CPP, private pensions, and benefit plans.

As well, this regime has launched a wholesale attack against the environmental movement and anyone else who questions the folly of expanding the tar sands or exploiting other non-renewable resources. Shutting down independent voices and reducing the ability of the public service to monitor environmental degradation is a key part of the agenda.

Canada is moving in the direction of becoming a petro-state, where the interests of big oil trump anything else. History shows that the dominance of oil interests in any economy inevitably leads to the erosion of democracy. The most blatant example is the infamous Kock brothers using their massive oil wealth to fund the Tea Party and flood the American airwaves with right-wing attack advertising. It is no surprise that the roots of Harper's politics derive from Alberta's oil elites and their zealous pursuit of privatization, union-busting and climate change denial.

The labour movement should be at the centre of a massive country-wide resistance to the destruction policies of the Harper government. We will need to unite with concerned Canadians to expose and oppose every aspect of their rule, from election robo-calls to firing scientists and gutting the Fisheries Act. With Conservatives holding half the seats in Toronto and York Region, we have a particular responsibility to challenge these MP's in their own backyards.