

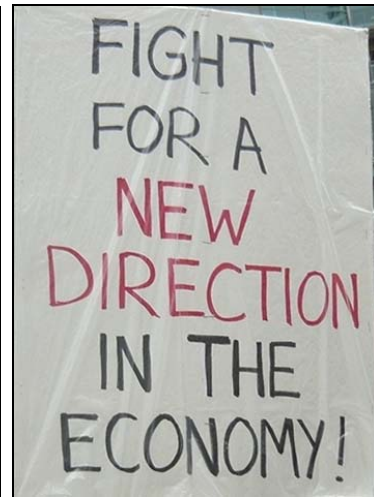
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Alberta Government's "Blue Ribbon Panel"

**Stop Paying the Rich! Increase Funding for
Social Programs and Public Services!
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The stepped up anti-social offensive of the Kenney government in Alberta shows what the pay-the-rich policy means for Canada's future unless the people's *No!* becomes organized and effective.

The Kenney government's "Blue Ribbon Panel" report on Alberta's finances, released September 2, demands that Alberta's working people accept ever greater austerity. The report calls for a \$600 million cut to investments in social programs, intensified privatization of all public services, and legislation giving the government power to unilaterally determine wages, benefits and working

conditions of public sector workers. It seeks to block any investigation or discussion on a new direction that can empower and mobilize the working people to solve the problems in the economy and social conditions in ways that favour them and open a path forward.

The current agenda of the financial oligarchy that has seized the reins of power at every level of government is to block the people from empowering themselves politically to solve problems. The party, or coalition of parties, which will be brought to power in the federal election to form the next government is the one the rich and powerful think can deliver an agenda that favours the financial oligarchy. The election has nothing to do with choices the people have among the cartel parties and their candidates, or with how the results of diversionary polling questions play out. The rich and their spokespersons in the media and amongst the elite control the official election and seek to deliver a government that will allow them to become richer within the status quo and keep the demands of the people for political empowerment in check.

How can the people empower themselves politically is at the heart of the matter. This must be a topic of conversation in the election from coast to coast to coast.

Clamours for Austerity and Attacks on Working People



Pickets over the summer in Lethbridge (left) and Red Deer against Bill 9.

The report of the "Blue Ribbon Panel" established by the Alberta government says the \$600 million cut in investments in social programs it recommends should only be the beginning in a process to reduce annual provincial spending by billions of dollars. The demanded cuts are particularly severe in health care and advanced education, as well as in primary and secondary school education, public sector wages and benefits, and spending on fixed provincial assets. The report says austerity will be, "a significant challenge because it will require government not only to accommodate the effects of both population growth and inflation but also reduce spending substantially below current levels." [1]

The Kenney government appointed the Blue Ribbon Panel on Alberta's finances specifically to destroy public opinion for increased investments in social programs and public services and to attack the right of public sector workers to bargain collectively and have a say over their wages and other terms of employment including the right to say *No!*

The government's Bill 9 last spring was the opening shot in its austerity plan to attack social programs, public services and the right of public sector workers to negotiate collectively their terms of employment, leading to an anti-social budget in the fall. Alberta unions have pointed out that the intent of Bill 9 was to disrupt the negotiated arbitration process on wages to give the government

time to introduce legislation mandating wage freezes and/or rollbacks.

The members of the Blue Ribbon panel were chosen for their well-known neo-liberal views and practice. Their report lays out how the government should proceed in attacking public sector workers. This includes holding sham consultations with unions so that the government can claim it has participated in a process of collective bargaining and therefore is not in violation of the Charter right to bargain collectively. The sham consultations would then be followed by legislation dictating wages, benefits and working conditions.

The Chair of the panel, Janice McKinnon, already wrote the panel's austerity script back in 2017 when she co-authored a paper calling on the Notley Alberta government of the day to attack public sector workers and advising how this could be done "legally."^[2] This involves ensuring that the government's claim to be defending the public interest is set out in the legislation, a process of "good faith" bargaining takes place, and the unions are consulted. If the government follows the script, the Supreme Court of Canada would consider that good faith bargaining has taken place, the unions representing the workers have been consulted, the right of workers to associate for the purpose of pursuing their goals has been met and the public interest according to the financial oligarchy has been defended.

The Alberta working class has already shown its mettle in defence of its rights in the organized mass demonstrations denouncing Kenney's anti-worker Bill 9. Let us together intensify this organized defence of the dignity and rights of the working people. The Blue Ribbon Panel's austerity agenda and attacks on working people must not pass!

Notes

1. For Blue Ribbon Panel's Report [click here](#).
2. "Putting the Alberta Budget on a New Trajectory," Janice MacKinnon and Jack Mintz, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary.

(Photos: AUPE)

Panel Reports Pre-Determined Conclusions for Austerity

- *Dougal MacDonald* -

The Alberta government released the pre-determined conclusions of their Blue Ribbon Panel on September 2. The Kenney government mandated a hand-picked group of seven neo-liberals last May to do an inquiry into how Alberta spends its money but not how it acquires it. According to Premier Kenney, the panel was "an independent non-partisan group of experts." Independent of what is a fair question. Upon looking at their biographies, one could fairly assume they are independent of Alberta's working people and the difficult social conditions and problems they face and totally dependent on the financial oligarchy that dominates the province.

The panel was just another in a long line of phony inquiries initiated by various Alberta governments to justify pre-determined policies and practices and their refusal to lead any discussion let alone implementation of a new pro-social direction for the economy that solves its fundamental problems.

The established five-step process for such fraudulent inquiries is the following:

1. Decide in advance what conclusion the inquiry is supposed to reach.
2. Populate the panel with people who agree with the pre-determined conclusion.
3. Consult with Albertans but ignore everything they say that disagrees with #1.
4. Find various data that support the pre-determined conclusion.
5. Publicize the pre-determined conclusion.
6. Brag that the inquiry shows both the chosen experts and the public support the pre-determined conclusion.

Janice MacKinnon, former NDP Finance Minister from Saskatchewan, headed the Blue Ribbon Panel. During the Romanow NDP government's austerity program in the 1990s, MacKinnon closed 52 rural hospitals, cut funding to health care and education, boosted the provincial sales tax to 9 per cent and increased assorted user fees. Even though a former NDP cabinet minister, she meets the litmus test for a Kenney neo-liberal and has proved in practice her loyalty to the financial oligarchy.

Other panel members were Jack Mintz of University of Calgary, corporate Canada's favorite economist; Mike Percy, former chief of staff to former Conservative Premier Jim Prentice; Dave Mowat, who led the previous government's royalty inquiry, which reached the pre-determined conclusion that royalty rates in the oil and gas industry should stay as they are; Kim Henderson from BC's Liberal Christy Clark government well known for its attacks on social programs and working people; Bev Dahlby of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank; and Jay Ramotar, a former deputy-minister in Alberta's Conservative government.

The report of the panel contains 26 recommendations, none of which is a surprise. The recommendations for an austerity agenda can be summed up as follows: cut public funding for social programs especially health care and education; privatize all aspects of health care and commercialize post-secondary education to make them a source of enterprise profit for the rich oligarchy; cut workers' wages, benefits and pensions; raise tuition fees; close public post-secondary institutions; cut public funding for infrastructure, especially public services and privatize what is not already in the direct private hands of the oligarchs; privatize public land; cut taxes for the wealthy; and, attack workers' rights starting with depriving public sector workers of their right to negotiate and collectively have a say in determining their wages, benefits and working conditions.

Public opinion strongly holds that the panel was a hoax and that the UCP government had already decided on implementing the austerity measures outlined in the recommendations. The actual report of the panel was a rubber stamp. In fact, panel members MacKinnon and Mintz had already published a similar paper in October 2017, which recommends many of the same policies. No matter. The people of Alberta will not accept these attacks and will fight them, just as they have always done in the past and will continue to do in the future.

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