

Canada's "putsch": Oppose Conservative power-grab! No support to Liberal-NDP coalition!

By Keith Jones, 4 December 2008

Canada's right-wing, minority Conservative government is preparing to cling to power illegally. Led by the neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, the Conservatives are threatening to unleash a constitutional crisis and incite anti-Quebec chauvinism rather than allow the parliamentary opposition parties to form an alternate government.

"We will use all legal means to resist this undemocratic seizure of power," declared Harper on Monday, after the opposition parties—the Liberals, New Democratic Party (NDP), and Bloc Québécois (BQ)—announced an accord to form a Liberal-NDP coalition government supported by the BQ.

The Conservatives, who won the votes of barely one in five Canadians in the federal election held October 14, are accusing the opposition parties of attempting a "putsch" and thwarting the will of the electorate.

This is reactionary rot. It is the Conservatives who are acting undemocratically, and in manifold ways.

- Under Canada's parliamentary system, the opposition parties have every right to form an alternate government, since they won a majority of the seats in the House of Commons in a general election held just seven weeks ago.

If one includes the votes of the Green Party, which announced Tuesday that it too backs the Liberal-NDP coalition, 61.2 percent of voters cast their ballots October 14 for parties supportive of the coalition.

- So as to avoid defeat in a parliamentary non-confidence vote scheduled for next Monday, the Conservatives are reportedly preparing to prorogue or shut down parliament, which reconvened only on November 17, until late January,

- The Conservatives have announced that should they lose a non-confidence vote, Harper will "advise" the Governor-General to dissolve parliament. In effect, the Conservatives are demanding that Canada's unelected head of state deprive the opposition of its constitutional right to form a government. And should Governor-General Michaëlle Jean not capitulate to their anti-democratic demand, the Conservatives are threatening to unleash a wider political and constitutional crisis by attacking the democratic legitimacy of the Liberal-NDP coalition.

- With the support of much of the corporate media, the Conservatives have launched an aggressive drive to mobilize reactionary forces, denouncing the Liberals for aligning with "socialists" and "separatists," references respectively to the NDP and BQ, against "Canada's government."

To oppose the coming to power of a "socialist-separatist driven coalition," the Conservatives have called "Rallies for Canada"

in the country's major cities this coming Saturday. Their not so veiled purpose is to intimidate the Governor-General.

In the last parliament the Conservatives repeatedly depended on the votes of the BQ to remain in office. Yet, in a transparent attempt to whip up anti-Quebec chauvinism, especially in western Canada, the Conservatives are implying that the proposed coalition government is all but treasonous, because it would put Canada's government "at the mercy of people committed to destroying our confederation."

- Whatever Governor-General Jean ultimately decides, the very fact that the Conservatives are intent on making her demonstrably choose Canada's government has the effect of giving greater legitimacy to, and expanding the power, of this reactionary office.

Under Canada's constitutional monarchy, the monarch's representative, the Governor-General, is almost always legally required to follow the "advice" of the Prime Minister—the head of the party or multi-party alliance with majority support in parliament—but wields, although this is not generally known, virtually unlimited "reserve" powers. Through this archaic mechanism, the Canadian ruling class has given itself a means of short-circuiting parliamentary democracy in a period of acute crisis.

Any use by the Governor-General of these powers establishes a reactionary precedent that can and will be invoked against working people in future political crises.

- The current crisis was precipitated by the fiscal and economic update the government tabled in parliament last Thursday. The update was chock full of right-wing and flagrantly anti-democratic measures. These included the abolition of a \$1.95 per vote, annual subsidy to federal political parties—an action universally condemned in the corporate media as a brazen Conservative attempt to cripple the opposition by bankrupting them. The Conservatives also suspended the collective bargaining rights of federal workers, removing their right to strike until 2011. Last but not least, under conditions of a financial crisis and world recession that threaten working peoples' jobs and pensions, the Conservatives spurned calls for increased support to the unemployed and expanded public works initiatives, choosing instead to slash public spending.

If a putsch is afoot in Ottawa, it is manifestly a right-wing putsch being carried out by Harper and his Conservatives.

In opposing the Conservatives' unconstitutional and anti-democratic attempt to retain power, working people must give no political support to the proposed Liberal-NDP coalition government.

The Liberals are the Canadian bourgeoisie's traditional party

of government. They have repeatedly used their opponents on the right as electoral foils, then in office imposed the policy prescriptions of the right, be it Trudeau's three-year wage controls in the 1970s or the massive public spending and tax cuts imposed by the Chrétien-Martin Liberal government of 1993-2006.

Canada's social-democratic party, the NDP, is a no less dependable prop of capitalist rule. When it has formed provincial governments, most notably in Ontario during the recession of the early 1990s, the NDP has come into headlong conflict with the working class, including slashing social spending, promoting "workfare," and breaking strikes and otherwise attacking workers' rights.

The BQ's sister party is the Parti Québécois. When the PQ last held office as Quebec's provincial government (1994-2003), it carried out a program of social spending and tax cuts strikingly similar to that of its federalist Liberal rivals in Ottawa—a program designed to redistribute wealth from working people to the most privileged sections of society.

None of the three opposition parties have questioned, let alone opposed, the Harper government's commitment, without any public discussion, of tens of billions of dollars to prop up Canada's big banks.

Few details of the coalition agreement have been made public. But it is known that the Liberal-NDP government will not "revisit" the Afghanistan issue, i.e., that the Canadian Armed Forces will continue to play a leading role in the Afghan counterinsurgency war through 2011. Also, the Liberal-NDP government will implement the Conservatives' five-year, \$50 billion-plus program of corporate tax cuts.

As for the promised massive economic stimulus package, it will be welcomed, no doubt, by the big manufacturers and politically promoted as a program to "save jobs." But Ontario's Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty has let it be known that any federal-provincial assistance to the automakers will be used as a means to extort sweeping new contract concessions from autoworkers. The Canadian Auto Workers union, a strong ally of McGuinty and an early advocate of a federal NDP-Liberal coalition, has already announced its willingness to make further changes in

workrules, that is, to impose speed-up and job cuts.

To repeat, the working class must oppose the Conservatives' power-grab. The attempt of one of the major parties of the Canadian ruling elite, with considerable and quite likely preponderant big business support, to overturn long-established parliamentary and constitutional forms is a frontal attack on democratic rights.

But in opposing the Conservative's illegal attempt to block the opposition from forming a government, working people should extend no political support to the opposition parties or their alternate government. Rather the struggle to defend democratic rights and workers' jobs and living standards and against imperialist war is entirely dependent on the development of an independent political movement of the working class in opposition to the entire bourgeois order.

In this respect, there are important parallels with the political and constitutional crisis that erupted in the United States over the outcome of the 2000 president elections. It was incumbent upon socialists to vigorously oppose the attempt of the Republican right, supported by the most powerful and rapacious sections of the US plutocracy, to steal the election on behalf of George W. Bush; but this opposition in no way implied any political support to the Democrat Al Gore.

Ultimately Gore and the Democrats capitulated to the right, allowing Bush to assume the presidency unopposed after the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court, in flagrant violation of the law and the democratic will of the American people, declared him president.

The Socialist Equality Party will be intervening broadly in the working class in the coming days—including in the Canadian Labour Congress-sponsored "Make Parliament Work! Coalition Yes!" rallies—to mobilize opposition to the Conservatives' anti-democratic power grab and politically prepare the struggle against the alternate big business government being organized by the Liberals, NDP, and BQ with the support of the trade union bureaucracy.

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