

Canada's social democrats debate winding up NDP

Guy Charron

24 November 2001

Canada's New Democratic Party is holding its biennial convention in Winnipeg this weekend under conditions of unprecedented crisis. Since 1993 the NDP has suffered one electoral rout after another and seen its share of the vote in federal elections more than halved to just 8.5 percent.

Party leaders acknowledge something must be done to arrest the NDP's decline into political irrelevance, but are bitterly divided over policy and orientation.

Two of the party's thirteen federal MPs are championing the New Party Initiative (NPI). Formed last summer, the NPI advocates the NDP spearhead a campaign to create a "new party of the left" that would embrace so-called grassroots activists and advance a program more in keeping with NDP tradition. Another party faction, NDProgress, urges that the NDP remake itself in the right-wing image of Tony Blair's New Labour Party.

Meanwhile, there are calls from both the social-democratic party establishment and the trade union officialdom for the NDP and unions to sever their organizational ties. Such a break would have major political and organizational consequences for the NDP. Union donations account for some 15 percent of the federal party's operational budget and over half of its election financing.

Although federal party leader Alexa McDonough says that "everything is on the table" in the current debate on the NDP's future, she herself has thus far refused to do much more than mouth social-democratic platitudes. Patently, McDonough's fear is that she will be unable to find a means of accommodating all the factions in a "revitalized" NDP. With only one MP more than the bare minimum for official party status in the House of Commons, the NDP can ill afford any defections.

None of the NDP's factions are able to provide any serious analysis of the crisis besetting Canadian social democracy, let alone offer a way forward for the working class. The NPI counterposes a purported militant NDP tradition to the party's sharp lurch to the right over the past decade. But Canadian social democracy has always worked to subordinate the struggles of the working class within the political and economic framework established by capital.

For three decades, from its formation in 1961 to the early 1990s, the NDP was the "third party" in Canadian politics, a sometime occupant of provincial office in three of the four Western provinces and an increasingly potent electoral force in Ontario, Canada's most populous and industrialized province. This synopsis of the NDP's electoral fortunes, however, hardly does justice to its pivotal role in Canadian politics. As the political instrument of the trade union bureaucracy, the NDP played a vital role in regulating class relations. The union bureaucracy made use of the NDP in pressuring big business Liberal governments for social reforms, the better to head off the development of an independent and anti-capitalist working class political movement. Through parliament and collective bargaining, the profit system could be humanized, with a decent living standard for all and a modicum of social equality, or so claimed the social democrats.

Then in the early 1990s, under conditions of the worst slump in Canada since the Great Depression, working people brought the NDP to power in Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan—provinces representing more than half the country's entire population.

Their hopes that the NDP would protect them from the slump were quickly dashed. The NDP governments imposed massive public and social spending cuts, wage cuts and wage austerity, and parroted the rhetoric of the right on everything from welfare reform to law and order. Returning from a session of the Davos Economic Forum, Ontario NDP Premier Bob Rae bluntly declared there was "no alternative" to the imperatives of the capitalist market.

In Saskatchewan, the NDP has succeeded in clinging to power only because much of the former Conservative opposition was jailed on corruption charges and because it has entered into a parliamentary alliance with the Liberals.

The Ontario and British Columbia NDP governments paved the road to power for governments of unabashed reaction committed to destroying what remains of the welfare state. Today the NDP holds just 2 of the 79 seats in the British Columbia provincial parliament and in Ontario only 9 of 103.

The NDP's decline in political influence has been paralleled by that of the trade unions. Like the NDP, the unions have moved sharply to the right, collaborating hand-in-glove with big business in the imposition of mass layoffs, wage cuts and speed-up. As a result they too have experienced a dramatic decline in working class participation and support, although this has been somewhat masked due to automatic dues check-off (the Rand Formula.) With capital's most rapacious representatives, like the Ontario Tory government, systematically curbing the union officialdom's political role, whether institutionalized or informal, the union bureaucracy has been plunged into crisis.

At one level, the current crisis of the NDP is the outcome of the scramble of various groups of union bureaucrats and social democratic politicians to find a political mechanism to advance their careers and defend their interests. More fundamentally, it is a by-product of the breakdown of the bourgeoisie's attempt to regulate the contradictions of capitalism and the class struggle in the post-second world war world through national economic regulation and the Welfare State—a process that began in the late 1960s and reached maturity in the 1980s.

Among the questions that has caused the most controversy within the NDP is whether it should continue to provide for trade union affiliation and allow for trade union block-voting at conventions. NDProgress is calling for "one person one vote," believing that breaking the party's ties to unions will go a long way to proving to big business that the NDP has shed any connection with socialism and the working class. However, by the time the NDP gets around to delivering its verdict, the union bureaucrats may well have made any decision moot. Many union leaders have concluded that their organizations links to the NDP have become an encumbrance to political horse-trading with Liberal and Tory

governments in Ottawa and the provinces.

Following the NDP's most recent federal election rout, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) announced a review of its relations with the NDP and this summer it broke with traditional CLC practice, announcing a political campaign independent of the NDP.

During and after the fall 2000 federal campaign, CLC President Ken Georgetti criticized the NDP for focusing its campaign on the defence of health care, instead of competing with the other parties in the clamour for tax cuts. This position, which in effect amounts to a green light for further public spending cuts, shows how one wing of the bureaucracy is seeking to offset rank and file discontent over declining real wages. Cuts in personal income taxes increase the take-home pay of better-paid workers without imperilling the "competitive position" of their employers—only public and social services and the working people who depend on them suffer!

Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) President Buzz Hargrove, the leading "left" within the CLC, has staked out a different position. Although he has not endorsed the NPI per se, he has said McDonough should resign and a new, more radical party of the left be founded. His fear is that the NDP has become so indistinguishable from the Liberals, Canadian capital's preferred party of government, and so discredited in the working class that it can neither serve to effectively pressure the other parties or act as a political safety-valve for the union bureaucracy. Hargrove has repeatedly warned his fellow bureaucrats of the danger of a left-wing movement developing outside their political control. In a recent press interview, he declared, "There is so much room on the left ... so many people searching for answers, but what we are trying to do is be the same as the other guys, the other parties, with a kinder, gentler face."

Although he argues that there is an enduring need for "working class politics," Hargrove also favors severing the union-NDP tie, so that the CAW leadership can have greater maneuvering room. In the 1999 Ontario provincial election, the CAW called for "strategic voting" for the Liberals—in effect the election of a Liberal government—although on some questions they advanced policies to the right of the Harris Tories.

Last February, the NDP leadership established a steering committee to study the "Future of the New Democratic Party." But after a half-year's labor all the committee could produce was a compendium of contradictory complaints about the NDP's current policy and constitution.

Prior to the 1999 NDP convention, McDonough identified herself with those in the party calling for it to move even further right and declare its commitment to Blair's "Third Way." But she backed off when confronted with widespread opposition. An obstacle to the NDP recasting itself in the mould of Blair's New Labour is that the federal Liberals already claim to occupy that political space.

Some party elders have gone so far as to speculate about the possibility of a realignment of Canadian politics, in which the emergence of a new right-wing party formed out of some combination of the Canadian Alliance and the Conservatives precipitates a merger on the "left" of the Liberals and the NDP. It is public knowledge that prior to the last election, Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien sought to persuade former Ontario NDP Premier Bob Rae and the then outgoing NDP premier of Saskatchewan, Roy Romanow to stand as Liberal candidates. Romanow, who has since been named by Chrétien to head his Royal Commission on Health Care, has said he is not in principle opposed to a regroupment of the Liberals and NDP, only so long as it is a genuine fusion, not a Liberal take-over.

In recent months, McDonough and her small coterie of supporters have sought to maneuver, one day trying to give the NDP a more radical gloss and the next seeking to reassure her party's right wing and Canadian big business that the NDP is an establishment party.

Thus the NDP broke with its sister social-democratic parties in Europe in not endorsing the US war on Afghanistan. (It would back a United

Nations sanctioned one, like the US-led war on Iraq in 1991.) But later the NDP announced it "supports" the Canadian Armed Forces personnel who are assisting in the US attack and has joined with the other parties on the House of Commons defence committee in calling for a billion dollar per year increase in Canada's military spending.

There are two groupings in the NDP that claim to oppose the party leadership from the left. By far the larger of these is the recently created New Politics Initiative. Among its key proponents are former National Action Committee on the Status of Women President Judy Rebick, CAW official Jim Stanford and MPs Svend Robinson and Libby Davies.

Initially, the NPI made a big splash by calling for the NDP to be wound up, but its sponsors were soon at pains to insist that they believe the NDP must play the key role in the building of any new left party. In other words, they are calling for the resurrection of the social-democratic party that has played, along with its union allies, the key role in derailing and suppressing the struggles of the working class, including taking a wrecking ball to the very social reforms with which it was once associated.

With the approach of the convention, the NPI has made clear it does not seek a confrontation with the NDP leadership. A recent statement signed by key NPI leaders hailed the ambivalent stand McDonough has taken on the US war on Afghanistan.

Along with its failure to make any serious critique of the evolution of Canadian, let alone international social democracy, the most telling point about the NPI is its embrace of the anti-globalization movement. While diverse elements have participated in anti-globalization demonstrations, the political platform incarnated in these protests is one of promoting the capitalist nation-state as a counter-weight to the most powerful transnational corporations. The logic of this position is that workers must politically organize and orient themselves along national lines and ally with the weaker sections of national capital to defend national industry against bigger and more technologically advanced foreign rivals.

While socialists struggle to mobilize the international working class against globally organized capital and its outmoded nation-state system, the NPI declares, "Our goal is to use the power of the Canadian state to roll back regressive social, environmental and economic trends in Canada and around the world."

The NPI is being touted by the Socialist Caucus, which includes in its leadership pseudo-Trotskyists. Like the NPI, the Socialist Caucus maintains that the future of the working class passes through the NDP, its decades-long support for Canadian capitalism and small and declining working-class membership notwithstanding, and that the NDP can be transformed into a vehicle to fight for socialism. It too has praised McDonough's stance on the Afghan war "as far as it goes." To bolster its opposition credentials, the Socialist Caucus is standing a full slate of candidates for the party executive, including party leader. Once the convention is over it will join with the likes of McDonough, Bob Rae and Svend Robinson in re-building the NDP and/or relaunching it under another brand name.

A new mass socialist party of the working class will not be built from the organizational and political entrails of the NDP. The NDP's legacy must be overcome through a conscious break from the program of national reformism and trade unionism and the building of a genuine anti-capitalist and internationalist party of the working class. It is for this perspective that the *World Socialist Web Site* fights.



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