

Canadian Elections:

NDP conceals right-wing program with activist rhetoric

David Adelaide, Keith Jones
26 June 2004

Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP), till recently on its deathbed, has experienced something of a revival during the current election campaign. According to the opinion polls, the trade union-supported NDP will win the support of about 20 percent of the electorate, equal to its best ever showing in a federal election.

Under the leadership of "activist" Toronto City Councillor Jack Layton, Canada's social democrats have reoriented themselves towards the anti-war, anti-globalization and environmental movements. At the same time, Layton has appealed to such pillars of the NDP establishment as former federal party leader Ed Broadbent and former Ontario party leader Stephen Lewis to return to the party's front-benches. He has also called on "progressives" in the Liberal and the now defunct Progressive Conservative parties, including former Liberal Deputy Prime Minister Sheila Copps and Tory anti-free trade campaigner David Orchard, to join the NDP.

The NDP platform is well to the right of that the social democrats advanced during the 1960s and 1970s. Nowhere does the NDP speak of placing important companies or sectors of the economy under public ownership. It promises to balance the federal budget in every year of an NDP government. Speaking before the Toronto Board of Trade, Layton attacked the Conservatives for fiscal irresponsibility for claiming that they can combine increased spending on health care and the military with significant tax cuts. Whereas traditionally the NDP has called for Canada's withdrawal from NATO, Layton advocates that Canada "press" for the reform of the US-led military alliance.

However, such is the stampede of the Liberals and Conservatives to the right and the right-wing record of the NDP when it has held power provincially that the federal NDP's denunciations of Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin for championing corporate interests, its calls for modest increases in taxes on corporate profits and the rich, and its opposition to for-profit health care appear by comparison to be "left."

Beginning in 1993, the NDP suffered a series of electoral debacles at both the federal and provincial levels, as working class voters sought to punish the party for implementing right-wing, austerity measures—sweeping cuts to public and social services, anti-union laws and tax hikes—in those provinces, especially Ontario and British Columbia, where it formed the government. In the 2000 federal election the NDP won only 8.5 percent of the popular vote and just enough seats to cling to the status of a recognized party in parliament. In the wake of the 2000 elections, the Canadian Labor Congress announced it was reconsidering its decades-old relationship with the NDP, while many of those who comprise the party's self-avowed left-wing flirted with the idea of creating a new party under the "New Politics Initiative" banner.

The current revival of the NDP is a product of two interrelated processes: a radicalization among broad layers of working people, and a

coming together of the social democrats, trade union bureaucrats, and petty bourgeois left behind the Layton-led NDP in the hopes of intercepting this radicalization and harnessing it to the failed program of limiting the most socially damaging effects of capitalist exploitation through state regulation and income redistribution.

Masses of people have been radicalized in the recent period—by the US's illegal invasion and colonial occupation of Iraq, by the puncturing of the stock market boom and the ongoing revelations of corporate corruption, and by the increasingly frequent demonstrations of capitalism's inability to provide for basic social needs, from the Walkerton water tragedy to mounting economic insecurity and social inequality.

The union officialdom and social democrats sense in this radicalization an opportunity to regain political influence, but even more importantly a danger. This was made explicit by former NDP leader Ed Broadbent, who recently announced that because of his concern over increasing social polarization he would seek a seat in Parliament for the first time since 1988. Explaining why he had chosen to back the "outsider" Layton for the NDP leadership rather than his good friend, NDP MP Bill Blaikie, Broadbent warned that the social democrats "cannot rest on the illusion that all those many Canadians who are fed up with the policies derived from the cutback mania ... will inevitably swing to the NDP. ... They can swing right past us to any number of other options."

For their part, the leaders of the NPI—or rather former leaders since the NPI recently voted to disband—are quite conscious that Layton is working hand-in-glove with the traditional NDP leadership, with those who either served in the Ontario NDP government of Bob Rae and the British Columbia NDP government of Mike Harcourt, Glen Clark and Ujjal Dosanjh or who acted as their backroom advisors. Gushed NPI leader and *Rabble* website founder Judy Rebick, "Layton is able to reach out to both the left and right in the NDP in a way that no leader has been able to do since Tommy Douglas."

The fondest hope of the NDP leadership is that it will hold the balance of power in a minority parliament, and will be able to trade its support to the Liberals of Paul Martin, the party that has won the accolades of business for having imposed the biggest public spending and tax cuts in Canadian history.

According to NDP lore, the social democrats were able to extract major concessions from the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau between 1972 and 1974, when the parliamentary arithmetic allowed the NDP to prop up a minority Liberal government. In fact, the increased influence of the NDP in Canada's parliament was a by-product of a massive upsurge of the working class that was fuelled by rising inflation and unemployment, but also by the Vietnam war and a worldwide working-class radicalization. The NDP-Liberal alliance of 1972-74 was among the mechanisms used by

the Canadian ruling class to contain this upsurge within the politically safe channels of parliamentary reformism and trade union collective bargaining.

Using the popular legitimacy provided it by the NDP, Trudeau and the Liberals won a majority government in the summer of 1974 posing as opponents of wage controls. They then initiated the big business counter-offensive that has continued to this day, imposing in 1975 a three-year program of wage controls, under which workers' living standards were eroded through inflation, and in 1978 announcing major social spending cuts. The NDP governments of the day in BC, Saskatchewan and Manitoba continued the federal NDP's collaboration with the Trudeau Liberals, breaking strikes with emergency back-to-work legislation and applying Trudeau's wage controls.

Today the attitude of the NDP leadership is if anything even more hostile to the struggles of the working class. In May when the British Columbia government's savage assault on hospital workers' jobs and wages threatened to provoke a provide-side general strike, BC NDP leader Carole James deplored the government's action, saying it had brought BC to "the brink of a crisis that threatens to further erode investor confidence in British Columbia and destabilize the BC economy." James then worked with the union bureaucracy to smother the strike and insure a business-friendly investment climate.

The NDP is seeking to appeal to popular revulsion against the crimes of the Bush administration. But it does so from the standpoint of Canadian nationalism, the ideology of the Canadian bourgeoisie, accusing the Conservatives in particular of betraying "Canadian values" because they want to press forward with privatization, deregulation, and tax cuts for business and the well-to-do.

Certainly the Conservative want to emulate the Republican right, but to claim that they are betraying "Canadian values" is balderdash. If workers in Canada currently enjoy a small measure of greater social welfare protection than their US counterparts this is as the outcome of the class struggle, not a supra-class consensus around more cooperative "Canadian" values.

Indeed, the NDP's insistence on a community of interest among all Canadians serves to bind workers to the interests of Canadian big business and divide them from their most powerful ally in the struggle against capitalism and imperialism—the US and international working class.

In the name of defending Canadian values and jobs, the NDP calls for the "renegotiation" of the North American Free Trade Agreement and for a series of government initiatives to support Canadian industry, including large cash handouts to the Big Three automakers.

The NDP also supports the imposition of a "minuscule tax on" international financial transactions, the Tobin tax. This demand, lifted from the program of the anti-globalization movement, specifically ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), is a utopian and reactionary attempt to revive the nationally-regulated form of capitalism that prevailed during the decades immediately following World War II. It is the antithesis of the socialist answer to capitalist globalization, which recognizes that there is an enormous progressive potential in the development of integrated global production—a potential that can only be realized through the struggle to mobilize the international working class against capitalism and the outmoded system of rival nation-states.

Similarly, Layton and the NDP seek to re-define the mass movement against the Iraq War as a movement in defence of "Canadian values," when what was most significant and progressive in the mass protests that convulsed the world in February-March 2003 was their coordinated international character.

To be sure, the NDP program contains a thin veneer of international "solidarity." The core of its program, however, is an economic nationalism which pits workers in Canada against their class brothers and

sisters internationally. The NDP, for instance, would defend "Canadian interests in negotiations with the United States for a new softwood lumber trade agreement by being prepared to respond to punitive tariffs on Canadian forest exports with retaliatory trade measures on energy exports ..."

The NDP have a long history of making common cause with those sections of Canadian capital that fear increased competition from their US rivals. Thus in 1988, the NDP joined with the Liberals, including Paul Martin and Magna boss Frank Stronach, in opposing the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. Similarly, the social democrats venerate a tradition of Canadian "nation-building," of using the power of the federal government to support Canadian capital, that is very much the tradition of Canada's Tories, beginning with Sir John A. Macdonald, the chief architect of both Confederation and the National Policy.

A central role in the NDP's attempt to marshal working people behind "Canadian values" is its promotion of the myth that the Canadian state is an international force for peace. The social democrats systematically counterpose a supposedly pacifistic, more humane Canadian capitalism to the more rapacious, imperialistic American variety. In this vein, the NDP platform characterizes Canada as a "humanitarian middle power" and proposes that "Canada should assert [its] role in the world by working as an effective, trained peacekeeper."

In truth, the Canadian ruling class was an enthusiastic participant in the two world wars of the last century. Canada's "peacekeeping" activities emerged in the historical context of the Cold War. It was part of Canada's contribution to sustaining the international imperialist order, as well as part of the Canadian bourgeoisie's strategy of promoting "multilateralism" as a means of restraining US power and gaining international influence. Canadian soldiers were called upon to help police agreements arising from conflicts between allies of the U.S. and Soviet Union, or involving the conflicting interests of NATO members (as in case of the Suez Crisis and Cyprus.)

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resurgence of US militarism, sections of the Canadian elite have increasingly come to see this peacekeeping role as cutting across Canadian participation in "peacemaking," that is wars carried out in the name of promoting peace and/or ending a humanitarian crises. For Canada's elite, as was repeatedly demonstrated by the debate over the Iraq War, participation in US-led wars is seen as vital in ensuring Canada "retains influence," i.e. can assert its right to a share of the spoils and geo-political interests.

In *Speak Out*, a book published to coincide with the election campaign, Layton champions both "peacekeeping" and "peacemaking." He chastises NATO for not intervening militarily in Yugoslavia sooner and complains that Canada should have been rewarded for its support of the US invasion of Afghanistan with trade concessions.

The NDP applauded the Chrétien Liberal government's decision to not formally join the US war on Iraq, having like the Liberals made clear that it would consider war justified if endorsed by the UN Security Council. Throughout the 1990s the NDP supported the punishing UN sanctions levelled against the Iraqi people and supported the US-led UN weapons-inspections, which were both searching for a pretext and scouting the terrain for American imperialism. Their new platform is conveniently vague on geopolitical specifics, but squares with the NDP's support for the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the recent deployment of the Canadian Armed Forces in support of the US-engineered coup in Haiti. It calls for priority to be placed on "peacekeeping and peacemaking operations conducted under UN auspices."

The evolution of the NDP mirrors that of social-democratic parties all over the world. Where it has held power over the past decade the NDP has implemented the neo-liberal agenda of big business and paved the way for the coming to power of governments of outright reaction. The Ontario NDP government of Bob Rae became notorious for its social contract

legislation, which stripped almost a million public sector workers of their collective bargaining rights and cut jobs and wages. The Rae government opened the door to the extreme right-wing Harris Tories. In British Columbia, the NDP closed hospitals, broke strikes, and cut corporate income taxes, only to be replaced by the Campbell Liberals

In the final analysis, the social democrats' lurch to the right is rooted in the collapse of the program of national reformism, which held that workers could humanize the profit system within the framework of a nationally-regulated capitalist economy. Whereas once the unions and NDP placed pressure on business and the state for concessions to the working class, over the past two decades they have acted ever-more openly as auxiliaries of capital, imposing wage, job and social spending cuts on working people so as to appease international investors.

The increased support for the NDP is one of many indices of a growing political radicalization in Canada and internationally. But if this radicalization is to develop it must be politically leavened by a recognition of the role of the NDP and union bureaucracy as props of the existing social order, and above all by a socialist and internationalist program.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact