

# SEP public meeting on Canadian elections

## Workers need a new political orientation

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Canada's federal election was held Monday, January 23. The World Socialist Web Site will post an initial assessment of the results on Wednesday, January 25.

On the afternoon of Sunday, January 22, the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) held a successful public meeting in Toronto, the country's largest city, to discuss the real issues in the 2006 Canadian elections.

The meeting was attended by a diverse and receptive audience, including WSWs readers from in and around the Toronto area and a contingent of SEP supporters from Montréal. The two principal speakers were Keith Jones, the national secretary of the SEP (Canada) and a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board, and Jerry Isaacs, a leading member of the SEP in the United States.

Jones, who gave the first report, began by stating that the 2006 Canadian federal elections have in two ways underscored the urgency of the international working class constituting itself as an independent political force.

On the one hand, said Jones, "In pursuit of their aim of bringing to power a Conservative government, the ruling class has mounted a media manipulation campaign of unprecedented scope and audacity. The corporate media at every turn has amplified the Conservative claim that this election should be a referendum on so-called Liberal corruption, while whitewashing the political record of the forces that have come together in the new Conservative Party, including the record of Stephen Harper, the neo-conservative ideologue who leads the Conservatives."

On the other hand, the 2006 Canadian elections "have once again demonstrated the utterly reactionary role of the official leadership of the working class—the social democrats of the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the trade union officialdom, who act as an integral part of the existing social order.

"For the social democrats and the leadership of the Canadian Labour Congress, the election campaign has been an occasion for the NDP to audition for the role of holding the balance of power in the next parliament, which is to say that the NDP's objective is to win enough seats that it will be able to support one of the two principal parties of big business as the government. In keeping with this objective, the NDP has moved still further right, proclaiming its support for 'fiscal responsibility,' abandoning its call for increased taxes on the well-to-do, and embracing the anti-democratic Clarity Act.

"A dissident faction of the trade union bureaucracy led by Canadian Autoworkers president Buzz Hargrove has campaigned openly for the reelection of a minority Liberal government. While the NDP leaders have deplored this, their disagreement is only over tactics. The NDP leadership believes Hargrove's electoral support for the Liberals will cut into the NDP vote, thus weakening the NDP's hand in future negotiations with the Liberals and Conservatives over the terms under which the social democrats will sustain them in power.

"The Quebec unions for their part have rallied behind the Bloc Québécois (BQ), the sister party of the Parti Québécois (PQ). While the

BQ and PQ proclaim *ad nauseam* that they uphold Québec's interests, they have demonstrated time and time again that when push comes to shove what they mean is upholding the interests of Québec big business against the overwhelming majority of Québec's population—the working class." Jones then reviewed the history of cuts to social programs and attacks on workers rights carried out by the last PQ government of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry.

"We don't have a crystal ball. It is impossible to predict what the results are going to be on January 23rd, which party or combination of parties is going to form the next government. But what we can say with certainty is that whatever the exact distribution of seats in the House of Commons following the 23rd, the coming period is going to see a dramatic intensification of the class struggle. This is demonstrated by the decisive shift of the ruling elite behind the Conservatives, and by the ruling class's readiness to employ anti-democratic methods to accomplish their goal of replacing Martin and his Liberals with a Harper-led Conservative government."

Jones reviewed the record of the outgoing Liberal government, which "by any measure...has been the most right-wing Canadian government since the great depression. The Liberals have won four elections in a row by portraying themselves as a bulwark against the principal party on their right.... Then, once ensconced in power, they have implemented much of the program of their ostensible right-wing opponents."

But despite this record, "the ruling class has increasingly grown frustrated with the Liberals because they believe that they have dithered on carrying through an even wider assault on basic social programs" and have not asserted with sufficient vigor its predatory interests on the world stage. Jones then discussed the debate within ruling class circles about how best to accomplish the dismantling of Medicare, and how through the Supreme Court's decision in the *Chaouilli* case a mechanism has been created for dismantling Medicare and the creation of a two-tier health-care system.

Next, Jones dealt with the corporate media's claim that the Conservative Party of Canada has evolved into a moderate, mainstream party. He reviewed the political biography of the Conservative leader, Stephen Harper, who supported the 1984 campaign of Brian Mulroney only to later break with the Tories for their supposed betrayal of neo-conservative principals. Harper would then become a key policy advisor of the newly formed Reform Party, and would champion the idea (later adopted by the Martin-Chrétien Liberals) that dismantling public and social services in the name of eliminating the federal deficit should be the pivot of federal government policy.

In the present campaign, Jones explained, the social conservatives in Harper's party have been "put on a leash or muzzled," to the point where Conservative candidates have been ushered out of meetings by their handlers before any chance for uncontrolled interaction with either the press or the public. "Behind this lies the fears of the Canada's corporate

elite that the agenda of the social conservatives could serve as a lightning rod...and disrupt what they see as the real issue, the imposing of right-wing economic measures.”

Jones emphasized that the SEP anticipates the emergence of popular opposition to the right-wing program of big business. “But the question is one of drawing the lessons of the past quarter century of defeats and reversals that the working class has suffered. Time and again, we have seen major movements of the working class, such as the huge opposition to the Harris government here in Ontario between 1995 and 1997, such as the recent BC teachers strike—time and again, we have seen such movements of opposition strangled by the trade unions and by the New Democratic Party.

“We in the Socialist Equality Party are fighting for the working class to reorient itself on the basis of a new program. At the centre of that program is the struggle for the international unification of the working class against capitalism. The only way to defeat globally organized multinational and transnational corporations is to develop a global offensive of the working class.”

Bringing his remarks to a close, Jones laid out the three essential principles upon which the SEP fights to build a new mass party of the working class: (1) the struggle to forge the international unity of the working class; (2) the rejection of the subordination of socio-economic life to the capitalist profit imperative and the struggle for socialism; (3) the struggle to establish the political independence of the working class from parties, such as the NDP, that seek to tie it to the profit system.

The meeting was then addressed by Jerry Isaacs, from the Canadian’s SEP’s sister party in the United States. Isaacs began his contribution to the meeting by outlining the political and social crisis unfolding under the Bush administration—an administration so admired by Canada’s likely prime-minister-to-be, Harper:

“In the more than four years since the Bush administration launched its so-called war on terrorism, the American government has descended to a level of unprecedented criminality, with the White House demanding unchecked powers for the president. Falsely assuming the mantle of commander-and-chief of the American people, the president now claims the right to spy on US citizens, jail indefinitely and without charges anyone the president deems a threat, and torture and ‘disappear’ opponents into secret prisons in far-flung countries.

“At the same time, one can see the future that Canadian workers are threatened with by looking at the social disaster produced by the decades-long promotion of the free market and deregulation by both Democratic and Republican parties.”

The US government “is incapable of protecting its own citizens from natural disasters; it cannot guarantee economic security or health care benefits to tens of millions of its citizens; nor carry out its charge to guarantee safe working conditions, for example, in the coal mines where over the past three weeks 15 miners have perished after the Clinton and Bush administrations systematically dismantled safety regulation in the name of a ‘partnership’ with the coal companies.”

Isaacs pointed to the growing popular hostility to the Bush administration, popular hostility that finds virtually no expression in official Washington. According to a poll conducted by the Zogby International polling organization in early January, a majority of the American people want the Congress to impeach Bush if he ordered (as he did) the wiretapping of US citizens without a judge’s approval.

Isaacs then discussed the role played by the Democratic Party, which “far from spearheading a popular struggle against the Bush administration functions as its cowardly accomplices.”

Isaacs said that the objective basis for the support of both wings of the American political establishment for policies of imperial plunder is to be found in an underlying decline in the position of American capitalism, characterized by “the collapse of major corporate icons such as General

Motors and United Airlines, the growing trade and budget deficits and dependence on foreign capital, particularly from China, and the unsustainable indebtedness of the entire population.”

Isaacs took up remarks made by Delphi CEO Robert Miller to the effect that the “social contract” between employers and the working class has ended and that it was necessary for workers to give up any idea that they might be guaranteed retirement benefits. Answering Miller, Isaacs said, “It isn’t that America or Canada or any other country can’t afford its workers. The real issue is that America can’t afford its rich.”

He went on to cite statistics on the enormous growth of social inequality over the course of the two and a half decades since 1979, in which the share of US national wealth enjoyed by the wealthiest 1 percent of the population has more than doubled, from 19 per cent to 40 per cent. Isaacs noted that the average corporate CEO makes 431 times the wage of the average worker.

Isaacs then discussed the intervention of the Socialist Equality Party in the 2006 US elections: “At the center of this campaign is the struggle for the international unity of the working class and, counterposing to the ceaseless demands that the needs of the world’s people be sacrificed to enrich a financial oligarchy, the rational, democratic and cooperative reorganization of economic life to meet the needs of the masses.”

Isaacs concluded his remarks by pointing to the international nature of the problems that confront workers in both the United States and Canada: “War, the attack on democratic rights, exploitation, unemployment, poverty and the destruction of the natural environment are not simply American problems. They are world problems and require global solutions. In the epoch of world, economy, the problems of mass society can be resolved only on the basis of an international socialist program.”

The meeting was then opened to questions from the audience, which led to further discussion of the SEP’s critical stance towards Québec nationalism, the NDP and the unions, the role of the radical left in the Canadian elections, the SEP’s attitude towards the regime of Hugo Chavez, and the nature of the SEP’s intervention in the Canadian elections.

A call for help with the cost of producing the meeting was issued, resulting in a sizeable collection. A substantial quantity of literature on socialism, and particular on the history of the International Committee of the Fourth International, was also sold.



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