

Canadian elections: NDP serves up thin gruel at Toronto kick-off rally

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Jack Layton, the leader of Canada's social-democratic party, the New Democrats or NDP, addressed a rally at Toronto's cavernous Direct Energy Centre this past Saturday. Billed as a kick-off event for the NDP's 28 odd candidates in the Greater Toronto area, the rally was attended by less than 500 people. But even this sparse crowd would have been sorely disappointed had they shown up with hopes of hearing a substantive discussion of the issues facing working people in the October 14 federal election.

The event was a splashy made-for-TV affair. Just prior to Layton's entry, party organizers, thrusting "Strong Leadership" placards into the hands of all and sundry, herded the small crowd to the front of the podium, all the better to give the appearance of a well-attended political "happening"—an Obama-like "Rally for Change" as the political advance team had dubbed the event.

Surprisingly, none of the assembled candidates were ever invited to speak and they seemed quite content cheerleading and waving castanets in the air as Layton made his way to and from the stage. A comedienne, however, was deemed important enough to be allotted time to deliver jokes about Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper's new sweater wardrobe and other tame wisecracks.

When Layton, whose political career has very much been propelled forward by his "television smarts," took the podium, he provided a textbook demonstration of how to stick to a script, no matter how stale or vapid. He hit all the required pep rally notes, while scrupulously avoiding any serious engagement with the social and political realities facing the population. During Layton's 30-minute presentation, there was not a word about the war in Afghanistan; not a word about the issues of torture, rendition and the erosion of democratic rights in Canada; and not even a mention of the massive convulsions in the world economic system that threaten deep global recession.

Instead, Layton sought to differentiate himself from Harper by highlighting the issue of "trust." The prime minister, Layton argued, would go "behind your back" whilst the NDP leader would "watch your back." Harper

was interested in solving the problems discussed around the "boardroom table" while Layton was concerned not "just about the boardroom table but the kitchen table as well."

Taking a populist tact, Layton railed against the "50 billion dollars in corporate tax cuts" that he accused Harper of providing for the most profitable companies doing business in Canada and called the prime minister to task for his abysmal record on environmental issues. But Layton's prescriptions for those working people sitting around their kitchen tables were thin gruel—to say the least. After all, like Harper, Layton and the NDP have, in deference to the "boardroom," eschewed deficit spending and promised to "responsibly" manage the economy within the parameters of a balanced budget. And in those provinces where the NDP has formed the government over the past two decades, it has meekly followed the dictates of big business, slashing social spending, imposing wage and job-cutting "social contracts," and promoting workfare.

The NDP having long ago abandoned any advocacy of serious social reform. In this campaign Layton is elevating certain consumer gripes—gripes that sometimes crop up in the pages of tabloid newspapers or around workplace water coolers—into central planks in his election pitch. Thusly, unfair bank charges at Automated Teller Machines, hidden charges by cell phone companies and exorbitant "Pay Day Loan" interest rates would be firmly dealt with by a crusading, "consumer-friendly" NDP. Similarly, spikes in gasoline prices that have become the scourge of the everyday driver would be "monitored" by a watchdog agency, on whose powers of actual intervention Layton diplomatically declined elaboration.

No NDP stump speech would be complete without the obligatory playing of the Canadian nationalist card. Companies that "packed up" jobs and shipped them out of the country would be penalized with an outsourcing tax. On this matter Layton was perhaps hoping that the assembled crowd would not be so impolite as to remember that, only days before, in Canada's auto producing centre of Oshawa, Layton offered massive subsidies to major global

manufacturers, many of whom place outsourcing strategies at the centre of their own business models.

Such nationalism is the stock and trade of the trade union bureaucracy and goes hand in hand with the unions' subservience to, and support for, the profit system and connivance in the imposition of layoffs, plant closures and contract concessions.

Layton next briefly expounded on a laundry list of other "kitchen table" issues. Child poverty, affordable day care, and access to health care were all mentioned in a single breath with no discussion of what the NDP propose to do about these important concerns.

Because two decades of government budget cuts have resulted in chronic hospital overcrowding and lengthy medical-procedure waiting lists, the fate of Medicare was a major popular concern in recent federal elections. Moreover, since the 2006 election, Canada's corporate elite has pushed forward with health care privatization exploiting a reactionary Supreme Court decision. Yet at Saturday's set piece rally, Layton made only a cursory reference to the assault on public health care.

Layton also barely made mention of the Liberal Party, which governed Canada from 1993 to 2006 and is the traditional governing party of Canadian big business. Commentators in the mainstream press have noted that Layton is preening himself in the image of the next Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition and, as a result, is taking pains to ignore the campaign of Liberal leader Stéphane Dion. But there is more to it than that. To take on the Liberals, Layton would have to highlight just how similar are the policies of the two traditional parties of Canada's ruling elite and indict them as the twin representatives of big business. To do this, however, would require that Layton introduce the question of social class into the election campaign—a tactic that social democracy around the world has fled from for almost a generation.

The crowd at the NDP gathering was largely middle aged or older. Although Layton went out of his way to welcome by name a small contingent of trade union leaders—the Ontario Federation of Labour's Wayne Samuelson, Wayne Fraser of the United Steelworkers District Six, Bob Huget of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union—as well as a smattering of local union officers, rank-and-file workers from their organizations were conspicuous by their total absence. The lion's share of the crowd, such as it was, consisted of party workers from the various Toronto constituencies, some pensioners, and a layer of professional community organizers, teachers, artists and health care advocates.

Several people that the WSWs spoke to at the rally had taken note of some of the "oversights" in Layton's speech.

A woman wearing a "Stop the War" button said that it was "disgusting" that Layton failed to even mention Canada's leading role in the Afghan war. The issue, after all, had made its way onto Harper's campaign agenda, and that of the mainstream media, only a few days prior to Layton's appearance. But when asked why on this basis she was waving a Jack Layton placard, she glumly responded that Layton was "the lesser of four evils."

Her companion, who sported an NDP button, pointed out that this particular date had been set aside by various antiwar groups as "Support the War Resisters Day." ("War resisters" are US military personnel who have fled to Canada rather than participate in Washington's wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan.) She chastised Layton for failing to mention that fact and failing to condemning the Canadian state's policy of returning them to the US military for punishment as "deserters." Nevertheless, she too would be voting for the NDP.

This "lesser evilism" outlook was also espoused by a nurse who related that although the NDP positions on health care were not very different from those of the big business Liberal party, the NDP nonetheless is at least more progressive on "women's issues." A community organizer from the impoverished inner-city neighbourhood of Flemingdon Park was engaged in a conversation with a man wearing an Obama T-shirt. While she had preferred Hilary Clinton in the American Democratic primary, she asserted that at least Obama was better than McCain.

There was a marked reluctance from party workers and organizers to speak in depth about any of the issues. Party functionaries from the Jack Layton National Tour, distinguished by their crisp business attire, responded with shrugs to a question from a WSWs reporter about the NDP's position on the war. When pressed, one organizer responded that "our positions on Afghanistan are well known. We don't have to talk about them."



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