

Canadian elections: Workers need new party

Reject “Anybody but Conservative” trap

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13 October 2008

The financial tsunami that has deluged Wall Street and banks and stock exchanges around the world underscores the urgency of the working class—English, French, and immigrant—constituting itself as an independent political force and advancing its own program to resolve the economic crisis at the expense of big business, not working people.

Even the corporate media concedes that the current crisis is the most severe and far-reaching since the Great Depression of the 1930s. This global crisis, not the trite election-promises and staged sound-bites of the five parties vying for office in Tuesday's federal election, will determine the actions of the next government whatever its composition.

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has claimed that Canada will be sheltered from the economic storm. And he has steadfastly maintained this pose even as hundreds of billions of dollars have been wiped off the Toronto Stock Exchange, the value of the dollar has crashed, and economists have acknowledged that a wrenching world recession is inevitable.

If Harper has been loath to spell out the implications of the crisis, it is out of fear of the electoral consequences. He recognizes that to bolster the crumbling position of Canadian big business, the next government will be compelled to impose draconian social spending cuts and other unpopular measures, while businesses themselves slash jobs and wages wholesale.

The Liberals, New Democratic Party, Bloc Québécois, and Greens have sought to win votes by pointing to Harper's manifest indifference to working peoples' concerns over the fate of their jobs, savings, and pensions. But they are no less beholden to big business and for that reason are incapable of voicing the elementary truth: capitalism—an economic order in which production, employment, and the fulfillment of the most basic social needs are subordinated to private profit—has failed.

In the face of the unfolding economic crisis, all four of the opposition parties have reiterated their commitment to a balanced budget and pledged to shelve their modest promises of increased social spending “if needed,” so as to adhere to the neo-liberal mantra against deficits. This only underscores that were one of the opposition parties or a combination of them to form the next government, they would uphold, just as surely as a Conservative government, the interests of big business and place the burden of the capitalist crisis on working people.

The immediate cause of the world financial convulsions lies in the attempt of the capitalist class to evade a crisis in the realization of profit from the process of production by turning to rampant speculation and financial manipulation.

Another means through which big business has sought to overcome its crisis has been by dismantling the welfare state and dramatically increasing the exploitation of the working class. Over the past three decades, corporate Canada has systematically cut jobs and driven down wages. Governments of every political stripe, meanwhile, have gutted unemployment insurance and social and public services, used a battery of laws to break strikes and otherwise restrict worker rights, and further redistributed wealth to the most privileged sections of society through

repeated rounds of corporate, capital gains, and personal income tax cuts.

The eruption of militarism is a third response of capital to its systemic crisis. By launching wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US ruling elite sought to secure military-strategic dominance in the Middle East and Central Asia, two of the world's most important oil-producing regions, and thereby place itself in a commanding position vis-à-vis its rivals. The other great powers and would-be great powers have responded in kind, announcing ambitious military expansion plans.

Only within this context can the Canadian ruling elite's enthusiasm for waging war in Afghanistan to prop up the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai be understood. As Harper has forthrightly said, if Canada is to be a “player” on the world stage—that is, a participant in the struggle among competing national-blocs of capitalists for markets, profits, and geo-strategic position—it must be ready to wage war in far away countries.

The Great Depression of the 1930s led to fascism and world war. If humanity is to avoid a similar fate in the 21st century, the working class in Canada, in concert with its class brothers and sisters around the world, must advance a socialist program. The financial system and major industrial corporations must be placed under the ownership and democratic control of the working class, so that the resources of society can be harnessed to meet social needs rather than be deployed solely to enrich the few.

Harper and Bush

Much of the election debate has revolved around the validity of comparing Harper to Bush. Working people need to critically analyze this debate and reject the “conclusions” advanced by both sides.

The corporate media, or at least most of it, has insisted that Harper is a “moderate,” center-right politician, who in practice long ago repudiated any neo-conservative views he may have once held. To suggest that he and Bush are political brethren is, or so it is claimed, gross caricature.

The reality is the Harper government has been among the closest allies of the Bush administration. Canada fully supported the US-encouraged Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and has allied with Washington in trashing the Kyoto Treaty on greenhouse gasses. Harper, alone among heads of western governments, has refused to criticize Bush's Guantánamo Bay concentration camp and patently illegal military commission kangaroo courts, refusing to call for the extradition of Canadian citizen Omar Khadr. And then there is the matter of Harper's March 2003 House of Commons speech urging Canadian participation in the Iraq war. At least half of it was directly plagiarized from an address given by the then Australian Prime Minister and close Bush ally John Howard.

Allowing for differences in character and their respective roles in world affairs, Harper and Bush are very much of a kind, personifying the turn of

the capitalist class to social reaction and war. Like Bush, Harper has reveled in the promotion of militarism, making the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan the defining action of his government, and proclaiming the military as the source of all Canadians' freedoms. He has promoted tax cuts as the best, if not only, solution to every socio-economic problem, employed reactionary law and order appeals to justify the building up of the repressive powers of the state, courted the religious right, and ruthlessly attacked his bourgeois political opponents, accusing them of being all but treasonous for questioning certain CAF actions.

Born of a merger between the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance and the Canadian elite's traditional alternate party of government (the Progressive Conservatives), Harper's Conservative Party is a new element in Canadian politics, whose emergence as the country's government attests to big business' determination to wage unrelenting class war.

If the corporate media obscure the affinity between Bush and Harper it is because it wants to disarm the working class.

To recognize this is not to subscribe to the claim that to "halt the drive to the right" workers should give the opposition parties their votes and political allegiance-the Anybody But Conservative campaign. Nor does it constitute support for the notion that the New Democratic Party (NDP) or any of the other opposition parties merit support because they constitute a "lesser evil." Rather, the bourgeoisie's embrace of reaction and the global economic crisis point to the urgency of the working class building its own party to prosecute the struggle against capitalism.

All of the establishment parties have been complicit in the dismantling of public and social services, the attack on democratic and worker rights, and the revival of the CAF as an instrument of war. All play their own role in harnessing the populace to the program of Canadian capital, with the social-democratic NDP and their allies in the trade unions having the special function of diffusing and derailing working-class opposition.

The Harper Conservative government has only extended and expanded the right-wing agenda of the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin. It was the Liberals who, in the name of eliminating the budget deficit, imposed between 1995 and 1997 the greatest public spending cuts in Canadian history and stripped the majority of Canada's unemployed of jobless benefits. Then in 2000 they announced \$100 billion in tax cuts. Likewise, it was the Liberals who ordered the CAF to join NATO's 1999 war against Yugoslavia; made Canada a partner to the US invasion of Afghanistan and subsequently gave the CAF a leading role in the colonial-style counter-insurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan; provided the US with military support in its illegal invasion of Iraq that (in the words of the then US ambassador to Canada) was far more significant than that provided by many self-proclaimed members of Bush's "coalition of the willing"; and that began the massive expansion and rearmament of the CAF.

The same, it should be added, could be said of George W. Bush. His administration represented only a new stage in the US ruling elite's embrace of reaction and war. It was the Democrat Carter who launched the US bourgeoisie's deregulation drive. The Clinton administration spearheaded "workfare" and made "regime change in Iraq" US government policy. As for Barack Obama, to whose coattails both the Liberal leader Stéphane Dion and NDP leader Jack Layton have sought to cling, he has made clear that he favours a massive US military presence in Iraq for decades to come and has rallied round the Bush administration's \$700 billion bailout of Wall Street, under which working people will pay for rescuing the wealth of the US plutocracy.

The ABC Campaign

The Bush-Harper comparison is front and center in the calls being made by the unions, Québec Solidaire, environmental non-governmental organizations, and various middle-protest groups for "strategic voting" on Tuesday to defeat the Conservatives. Many also openly advocate a post-election alliance, if not outright coalition, uniting the Liberals, NDP, Greens, and, possibly, the *indépendantiste* Bloc Québécois (BQ).

This perspective was most baldly advanced by Judy Rebick, a past president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, leader of the now defunct New Politics Initiative (a "left" faction of the NDP), and founding publisher of *rabble.ca*. Writing in the October 8 *Globe and Mail*, Rebick declares, "Instead of turning on each other in these critical last days of the campaign, the opposition parties can start negotiations to ensure that a new government representing the majority of Canadians will emerge from this election." She touts the 1985 Ontario NDP-Liberal accord under which the social-democrats supported the Liberals in forming Ontario's provincial government, in exchange for minor social reforms, as a model. "There is no reason why the Liberals, NDP, Bloc [BQ] and Greens cannot do the same." Without necessarily forming a coalition or "agree[ing] on everything," the four parties, claims Rebick, can "agree on government action to protect jobs, homes and pensions in the face of the global economic crisis and on significant action on climate change."

In other words, under conditions of the greatest crisis since the Great Depression, Rebick wants working people to put their trust and direct their energies toward supporting parties of the capitalist establishment, parties that time and time again have demonstrated that they represent not "the majority" of Canadians, but rather the interests of big business.

The NDP has neither called for "strategic voting" nor a coalition with the Liberals, who have vied with the Conservatives during the current election campaign as to which party offers big business the deepest tax cuts. But this is only for tactical reasons. The NDP fears that were it to propose an alliance with the Liberals prior to the elections it could cause "soft" NDP voters to vote Liberal and otherwise undermine the NDP's post-election bargaining position.

Nevertheless, the social democrats' objective is to join hands with the party of such open representatives of Canadian big business as Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin, and Iraq war advocate and Bush administration apologist Michael Ignatieff.

The NDP continues to tout the 2005 Liberal budget as the "first NDP budget." In exchange for some modest social spending increases and a delay in further corporate tax cuts, the NDP gave its support to a minority government of the arch-budget and tax-cutter Paul Martin, allowing it to remain in office for a further six months.

Moreover, under Jack Layton the NDP has openly courted dissident Liberal politicians and further disassociated itself with the working class by rebranding itself a "progressive party"-a term with definite establishment connotations in Canadian politics. It is not incidental, in this regard, that Layton has repeatedly lauded the political record of his father, a cabinet minister in Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government.

Workers and socialist-minded youth must spurn the "ABC" (Anybody But Conservative) campaign and the linked call for an alliance or coalition among some or all of the opposition parties. It is a trap for the working class.

The alliance advocated by Rebick would serve as a mechanism for institutionalizing at the national political level collaboration between the trade union bureaucracy and big business in reorganizing Canadian capitalism under conditions of acute economic crisis and at the expense of workers' jobs, living standards and rights.

"Strategic voting" first emerged as a major political issue in the 1999 Ontario election. It was the union bureaucracy's response to the eruption of mass opposition to the Harris provincial government's "Common Sense

Revolution", a sweeping assault on the social position of the working class. Initially the union bureaucracy supported a protest campaign against the Harris government, but it recoiled in fear as the opposition to Harris became more radical. An unlimited, implicitly political strike by the province's teachers in the fall of 1997, in defiance of the anti-strike legislation, was shut down by the unions. Thereafter, they turned to "strategic voting," ultimately helping to bring to power a Liberal provincial government that has at most made cosmetic changes to Harris's right-wing legacy.

The Liberals: the bourgeoisie's traditional party of government

The Liberal Party has historically been the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, precisely because of its ability to carry through the agenda of big business, while using populist rhetoric, and in an earlier period incremental reforms, to defray opposition.

The Chrétien-Martin Liberal government, which held office from October 1993 through January 2006, rallied voter support by denouncing the right-wing policy prescriptions of its Progressive Conservative Party, Reform, Canadian Alliance, and Conservative opponents, only to subsequently implement them. To name but a few: the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the regressive Goods and Services Tax (GST), the elimination of the federal budget deficit through massive social spending cuts, tax cuts skewed to the benefit of the rich, and the adoption of the Clarity Act with its threat to partition a seceding Quebec.

In keeping with its role as one of the two principal parties of the Canadian ruling class, the Liberals joined forces with the Conservatives twice during the course of the last parliament to ensure that the Canadian military expedition in Afghanistan was extended to the end of 2011.

The Quebec sovereignists likewise have a long history of railing against the right, all the better to impose on the working class the agenda of the corporate elite. In 1995, the Quebec unions, the BQ, and the Parti Québécois (PQ), its sister party at the provincial level, urged a "yes" vote for Quebec independence; then once the referendum was over Quebec's PQ government instituted a program of sweeping social spending cuts and regressive welfare reforms in the name of strengthening the Quebec nation.

The BQ's anti-Conservative stance in the current election is especially cynical for two reasons. First, like the Liberals, the BQ repeatedly provided the Harper government with the votes it needed in the last parliament to remain in office. Second, the BQ and their supporters in the Quebec unions have never called for the defeat of the Conservative government, only for Harper to be denied a majority. Speaking only last week, Duceppe made clear that the BQ is ready to collaborate with a minority Conservative government.

Many of those voting for the Green Party will do so because they mistakenly view it as an anti-establishment party. In fact the Greens boast that they are a "fiscally conservative" party, promote their environmental policies as the best way to make Canadian capitalism more competitive, and hope to be junior partners of a Liberal government as presaged by last year's "non-aggression" pact between Liberal leader Dion and the Green's Elizabeth May.

The NDP: a defender of the capitalist order

NDP leader Layton has urged working people to vote for his party on

the grounds that it will shield them from the economic crisis.

However, the NDP has a long record that demonstrates that whenever Canadian capitalism is in peril the social democrats rally to its support.

In the 1970s, NDP governments in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia helped initiate the bourgeoisie's counter-offensive against the working class by imposing Trudeau's three-year wage controls program. In 1983 when workers in British Columbia (BC) moved toward a province-wide general strike against a battery of Social Credit laws that introduced the Reagan-Thatcher model to Canada's West Coast, BC NDP leader Dave Barrett deplored the "Operation Solidarity" strike movement as illegal and a threat to "democracy."

Far from shielding the working class from the impact of economic crisis, the NDP governments that came to power in Ontario, BC, and Saskatchewan at the beginning of the 1990s, under conditions of the worst slump in Canada since the 1930s, imposed massive public and social spending cuts, as well as wage austerity and parroted the rhetoric of the right on everything from welfare reform to anti-labour laws.

The NDP's opposition to the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan has nothing to do with a principled opposition to imperialist war. The NDP supported the Canadian military intervention, including the Kandahar deployment, for the first five years and has been at pains to explain that were it to form the next government it would use other means to bolster the US-imposed Karzai regime.

The NDP advocates the Pearsonian tradition of "peacekeeping"-no matter that Pearson was a Cold warrior who won election in 1963 on a pledge to station US nuclear missiles in Canada. In an attempt to prove its "responsibility" to the Canadian elite, the NDP has systematically downplayed its opposition to the Afghan war during the election campaign although this position better corresponds with the views of Canadians than that of any of the parties.

The re-election of the Conservatives would not result in the melting away of the "ABC" perspective. On the contrary, as the class struggle intensifies, the unions, social-democrats and various protest groups will step up their efforts to prevent the working class from finding the road of independent class struggle.

Moreover, if the BQ does resume its collaboration with Harper there is every likelihood this campaign will take an increasingly pronounced Canadian nationalist direction, with an alliance between the NDP, Liberals and Greens promoted in the name of "defending Canada" against the "pro-US" Harper and the Quebec sovereignists.

For a new socialist-internationalist party

To defend their most basic needs, workers need a new party and a new type of politics—a party that refuses to accept the subordination of human needs to capitalist profit. A party that fights for a genuine government *of, for and by* the working class.

In opposition to the unions and NDP, such a party would fight for the international unity of the working class against capitalism and the outmoded nation-state system, which serves as the platform for various rival capitalist blocs to fight for profits, resources and geo-political advantage, while dividing working people.

The economic nationalism spouted by the unions and social democrats has only served to pit workers of one country against their class sisters and brothers internationally in a fratricidal struggle for an ever-dwindling number of jobs, wages and benefits. Invariably the union bureaucracy has spouted this nationalist poison, while collaborating with employers, in the name of saving "Canadian jobs," to impose concessions, speed-up and job cuts. Witness the evolution of the Canadian Auto Workers, which not

surprisingly is among the foremost promoters of the "Anybody But Conservatives" campaign.

Under conditions of deepening capitalist crisis and growing inter-imperialist antagonisms, the Canadian and Quebec nationalism promoted by the unions and NDP serves to condition working people for being dragooned behind the ruling class in war, as well as the corporate struggle for profits and market share.

The Socialist Equality Party (Canada) will encourage all genuine working resistance to the attempt of big business and its political hirelings to make working people pay for the failures of the "free market" system, be it in the form of strikes, plant occupations, or opposition to home foreclosures and rental evictions.

But such actions can have an enduring progressive significance only in so far as they become merged into a politically independent movement of the working class against the profit system.

It is for this that the SEP and the Fourth International, the world party founded by Leon Trotsky in opposition to the Stalinist betrayal of socialism, fights.



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