

Canada's constitutional coup: A warning to the working class

5 December 2008

In a flagrant attack on parliamentary norms and democratic rights, Canada's minority Conservative government, in conjunction with the unelected governor-general, has shut down the country's national parliament in order to prevent the opposition parties from ousting the government in a non-confidence vote scheduled for Monday.

Never before in Canada or, for that matter, any other country that follows the British parliamentary pattern, has a government prorogued parliament for the purpose of avoiding a non-confidence vote.

Two further facts underline the arbitrary and undemocratic character of Governor-General Michaëlle Jean's decision to grant Prime Minister Stephen Harper his request that parliament be suspended until January 26:

* In an election less than eight weeks ago, Canadians once again denied the Conservatives a parliamentary majority, giving the three opposition parties 163 of the 308 House of Commons seats and well over half their votes.

* To demonstrate that the Conservatives had lost parliament's "confidence," and in accordance with long-established constitutional practice, the three opposition parties had officially informed the governor-general earlier this week that they were committed to defeating the government at the earliest opportunity and supporting an opposition coalition government for at least 18 months.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has made clear its political opposition to a Liberal-New Democratic Party (NDP) coalition government supported by the Bloc Québécois. (See: "Canada's 'putsch': Oppose Conservative power-grab! No support to Liberal-NDP coalition!")

But the suspension of parliament and of the MPs' right to defeat and replace the sitting government strikes at the most fundamental democratic right—the right of the people to choose their own government.

Turning reality on its head, the Conservatives, with the

support of much of the media, have mounted a vitriolic and reactionary campaign, terming the opposition's attempt to bring to power an alternate government "illegal" and branding it an illegitimate attempt to overturn the results of the October 14 election.

They have labeled the proposed Liberal-NDP government a "separatist coalition," because the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois, which has previously provided the Conservatives with their margin of victory in confidence votes, is backing it. "That is as close to treason and sedition as I can imagine," declared Conservative MP Bob Dechert. Even sections of the corporate media that favor the suspension of parliament concede that Harper and the Conservatives have openly incited anti-Quebec chauvinism.

In a nationally televised address Wednesday, Harper vowed to "use every legal means" at his disposal to remain in power. Given that he has declared the opposition's attempt to form an alternate government a threat to Canada's "national unity" and "democracy," and has now shut down parliament, this vow raises the question as to how far he and his fellow Conservatives are prepared to go in subverting parliamentary and democratic procedures.

While the Conservatives have brazenly asserted the right to govern without parliamentary sanction, the linchpin of their constitutional coup is the governor-general, the representative of Canada's queen, the British monarch Elizabeth II.

A feudal relic, this archaic office, supposedly above the political fray, has—although this is not popularly known—virtually unlimited powers. These "reserve" powers are almost always held in abeyance, but the ruling elite has retained the office of the governor-general precisely in order to use it to short-circuit parliamentary democracy in a period of acute crisis.

Yesterday, Jean ordered parliament shut down to ensure the survival of a right-wing government under conditions of mounting economic crisis. In Australia in 1975, Governor General John Kerr replaced the Labor government of Gough Whitlam with the right-winger Malcolm Fraser when the Australian ruling class lost confidence in Labor's ability to

suppress a rising tide of working class struggles.

In keeping with the reactionary traditions and function of her office, Jean will provide no explanation for yesterday's decision to shut down parliament. Legally, she is accountable to no one.

This does not mean that yesterday's decision was her own. Canada's corporate elite had made it abundantly clear, through the editorial pages of its newspapers, that it preferred to see democratic principles throttled rather than see the government replaced by a Liberal-NDP coalition.

This coalition, one must add, is anything but radical. In striking their alliance with the Liberals, who represent Canada's traditional party of government, the social-democratic NDP pledged to uphold "fiscal responsibility" and support Canada's leading role in the Afghanistan war, and shelved their call for the repeal of a five-year \$50 billion program of corporate tax cuts.

The class character of the coalition—its subservience to big business—is underscored by its tepid reaction to yesterday's constitutional coup. None of the three opposition leaders dared question, let alone challenge, the office of the governor-general or her decision. Ten minutes into his press conference, NDP leader Jack Layton lamented that it was a "sad day for parliamentary democracy," then meekly moved on. Fissures have already appeared in the Liberal leadership over whether the party, in the "national interest," should not rally behind the Conservative government.

The political-constitutional crisis that suddenly erupted in Canada, following the government's presentation on November 27 of a fiscal and economic update, has its roots in deep conflicts within the Canadian bourgeoisie over how to respond to the world recession. The Conservatives, representing the most rapacious sections of capital, including Alberta's oil industry, have spurned calls for an economic stimulus package.

The crisis is also a product of the erosion of the popular base of support for the ruling class's principal parties. This is the result of their relentless pursuit over more than a quarter-century of policies aimed at increasing the wealth of the corporate and financial elite by dismantling public services, gutting union rights and slashing the taxes of big business and the rich.

In the 1993 election, the Progressive Conservative Party, the Canadian elite's traditional alternate party of government, exploded. The "new" Conservative Party, headed by the neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, is the result of a fusion between the right-wing populist Reform/Canadian Alliance and remnants of the Progressive Conservatives. In the October 14

election, the Liberals won 26.2 percent of the vote, their lowest total ever.

The traditional bourgeois-democratic framework is breaking-down. This is due, on the one hand, to the intensity of disputes within the ruling class over how Canadian capitalism can retain its world position under conditions of mounting global trade and geo-political rivalries, and, on the other, to its inability to develop a large, stable base of popular support for its program of social reaction and militarism and its fear of an eruption of the class struggle.

This week's events in the "peaceable kingdom" must serve as a warning to workers all over the world. The bourgeoisie is more and more running roughshod over basic democratic norms and principles and turning toward authoritarian forms of rule.

This has been seen clearly in United States. The right-wing campaign to impeach Bill Clinton on trumped-up charges was followed by the stolen election of 2000, and then an explosion of militarism and sweeping attacks on democratic rights under the Bush administration. Tens of millions voted last month for Democrat Barack Obama in the hope of putting an end to war and economic policies that have enriched a plutocracy while condemning the vast majority to economic insecurity and declining living standards. But Obama has moved quickly to reassure the US elite that when it comes to economic policy as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan there will be "a seamless transition," i.e., a continuation of the same basic course.

Now in Canada, as in the US, events have revealed that there is no constituency within the political and media establishment committed to the defense of constitutional principles and democratic rights.

The struggle to defend democratic rights is inseparable from a struggle against imperialist war and for the economic interests of working people. It depends upon the independent political mobilization of the working class in opposition to all of the official parties and the capitalist system which they defend.

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