Canada’s social democrats offer lifeline to Conservative government

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The NDP, Canada’s social democratic party, is offering a lifeline to the minority Conservative government of Stephen Harper under conditions where the other opposition parties, the official opposition Liberals and the Bloc Québécois, have indicated they will topple the government at the earliest opportunity.

At a press conference Monday, NDP leader Jack Layton repeated his refrain that the NDP wants “parliament to work,” indicating that he and his party are ready to support the Conservatives in non-confidence votes if Harper governs as if he has a parliamentary minority rather than a majority, i.e. if he makes minor concessions.

"I'm prepared to fight an election if it comes to it,” said Layton “... but I would rather be in [the] House of Commons working with people from other political parties on behalf of the people who sent us here just 11 months ago.”

Previously Layton has suggested that the NDP would be willing to support the government in exchange for improvements to Employment Insurance, enhanced legal protection for workers’ pensions, and regulation of credit-card interest rates.

During the past eight months, Layton has repeatedly castigated the Official Opposition Liberals for propping up the Conservative government, arguing that it shows the two major parties have a common rightwing agenda.

But no sooner had Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff announced that his party will no longer support the Conservative government, than the NDP started signalling that it could be reconciled to supporting Canada’s most rightwing government in living memory. Although the Conservatives have been constrained by their lack of a parliamentary majority from implementing their full agenda, they have made clear, particularly through their attacks on democratic rights, promotion of an assertive, militaristic foreign policy, and advocacy of tax cuts and “small government” that they are intent on effecting a radical revision of class relations at the expense of working people.

In an effort to convince sceptical reporters that the ostensibly leftwing NDP could forge an alliance with the Conservatives, NDP officials provided information on instances within the provincial political arena where the NDP has sustained Progressive Conservative governments in office. (The federal Conservative Party is the result of a 2003 merger between the Western-based, right-wing populist Canadian Alliance/Reform Party and the Canadian bourgeoisie’s traditional alternate party of government, the federal Progressive Conservatives, who had been reduced to a rump after holding office from 1984 to 1993.)

The Conservatives were quick to spurn the NDP’s overtures. Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney labelled the NDP “a party of hard-core left-wing ideologues” Continued Kenney, “These people drink their own Kool-Aid, right? So I don’t think we can see a realistic arrangement with the NDP.”

Harper himself indicated that he thought it highly improbable that the social democrats would support his government, adding that he wasn’t prepared to make “backroom deals.”

Layton and the NDP have nevertheless persisted in urging the Conservatives to work with them, the NDP leader arguing that he is not proposing any “backroom deals with the Prime Minister” but rather a public discussion on how the two parties could “make parliament work.” Said Layton, “There’s nothing strange or behind the scenes here.” However Layton has refused to spell out exactly what policy changes the NDP requires for it to vote to sustain the Conservatives in office.

As Kenny’s remarks illustrate, many in the Conservative caucus view the trade union-supported NDP, notwithstanding its decades’ long record as a junior party of the Canadian bourgeoisie and abandonment of even its traditional milquetoast reform program, as dangerously radical.

Also anything resembling a formal deal with the NDP would undercut the Conservatives’ plans to make a major theme of their re-election campaign the charge that the Liberals are conspiring with the “socialists” (the NDP) and the “separatists” (the pro-Quebec independence BQ) to form an anti-Conservative coalition government.

The basis of this charge is the coalition agreement that the three opposition parties reached late last fall after the Conservatives introduced an extreme right-wing financial update that rejected any stimulus package in the face of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Instead, the Harper government proposed a series of “austerity

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measures," including a patently politically-motivated change to party-financing laws aimed at bankrupting the opposition parties.

Much of Canadian big business was angered by the Conservatives' failure to provide them an economic boost, especially given the competitive disadvantage this would constitute under conditions where the Obama administration was promising major support to corporate America. But Canada's ruling elite was even less enthusiastic about the prospect of the NDP and BQ gaining a measure of power (the coalition agreement called for a Liberal-led, Liberal-NDP government supported from the "outside by the BQ). It quickly rallied round Harper's efforts to prevent the three opposition parties from exercising their democratic right to defeat the government. This culminated in Harper prevailing on the un-elected Governor-General to prorogue parliament for six weeks.

The undemocratic character of the Conservatives' actions was further underscored by the rightwing, Anglo-chauvinist campaign they mounted against the coalition. The Liberals' prospective alliance with the "socialists" and "separatists" was depicted as a semi-treasonous.

Bowing to the will of Canada's ruling elite, the Liberals meekly accepted the shutting down of parliament, hastened the exit of Stéphane Dion as party leader, replacing him with the arch rightwinger and "coalition sceptic" Ignatieff, and soon after jettisoned the coalition agreement.

Ignatieff has since repeatedly made clear his opposition to a coalition with the NDP, declaring this week, "Let me be very clear. The Liberal Party would not agree to a coalition. In January we did not support a coalition. And we do not support a coalition today or tomorrow."

Nonetheless, the Conservatives intend to keep dragging up the coalition, calculating that it will energize their rightwing base, under conditions where the first-past-the-post electoral system, the large number of constituencies where three or even four parties are competitive, and the general popular disaffection with politics and resulting lower voter turnout mean that the Conservatives would have a good shot at obtaining a parliamentary majority if they can corral the support of 23-25 percent of the eligible voters

The *Globe and Mail* reported Sept. 9 that the Conservative electoral strategy calls for them to emphasize two issues: the "danger" of a coalition and the claim that only their party can be trusted not to impose tax increases as the federal government seeks to eliminate the huge budget deficits that have resulted from the economic slump.

This was subsequently confirmed by a secret video recording of a Harper speech to Conservative party workers, in which he denounced the big business Liberal Party as quasi-socialist and called on the party faithful to ensure the election of a Conservative majority government because otherwise "this country will have a Liberal government propped up by the socialists and separatists."

The Conservatives have now begun airing ads that insinuate the Liberals are plotting to impose a "reckless coalition" on the country.

All of this notwithstanding, it is not impossible that the Conservatives will manoeuvre to ensure NDP support for a brief period, so as to better position themselves to win an electoral majority. The opinion polls indicate that at present neither the Conservatives nor the Liberals are poised to win a parliamentary majority. Obtaining the NDP's support for legislation temporarily extending employment insurance protection to long-tenured workers—such a bill was introduced in parliament yesterday—would help the Conservatives to cast themselves as a "moderate party" and undercut the oppositions' charge that the government hasn't done enough for the unemployed.

On a limited number of occasions Harper has been willing to ally with the NDP. Just last month, he appointed retiring Manitoba NDP Premier Gary Doer as Canada's new ambassador to Washington.

The corporate media, for its part, has voiced no enthusiasm for a fall election. It wants to see a majority government brought to power, for it calculates that a government more insulated from public opinion will be better able take "unpopular decisions" aimed at placing the full burden of the economic crisis on working people. But it fears that at present neither the Liberals nor Conservatives would be able to win sufficient popular support to obtain a parliamentary majority.

Nine months ago the NDP was eager to form a coalition government with the Liberals committed to waging war in Afghanistan and implementing the Harper government's $50 billion program of corporate tax cuts. Now it is offering a lifeline to the Harper government. The greater the economic crisis and the deeper the assault on workers' jobs, wages and social rights, the more the NDP and the trade unions scurry to the right.

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