

Canada's social democrats prop up Harper Conservative government

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The trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Bloc Québécois (BQ) voted Friday to prop up the minority federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper, Canada's most right-wing government in living memory.

And the NDP, Canada's social-democratic party, has served notice it is ready to continue supporting the Harper Conservatives for weeks and possibly even months to come—all on the pretext that such action is necessary to ensure the adoption of a hastily drafted Conservative bill that offers a pittance more in unemployment insurance benefits to a small percentage of Canada's more than 1.6 million unemployed.

"Our supporters prefer that we work for them rather than having an election no one wants," NDP leader Jack Layton told reporters shortly after he led his party's 37 MPs in voting for a ways and means motion arising from last January's budget—a budget that both the NDP and BQ opposed.

In an interview published in Saturday's *La presse*, Layton not only defended his party's support for the Harper government with the claim that the NDP is concerned with securing "concrete results for people" not "appearances." He signaled that the NDP will explore whether its newly minted alliance with the Harper government can continue even after the Conservatives' Employment Insurance (EI) legislation is adopted. Asked by *La presse* how long the NDP will offer "stability in Ottawa," Layton replied, "That depends on Prime Minister Harper.... [W]ill he try to respond to the realistic and important proposals that are on the table concerning pensions, credit card fees, and climate change?... If he responds to our proposals that would indicate a willingness to have a parliament that works rather than a parliament that is always fighting."

A Quebec regionalist and *indépendantiste* party, the BQ has a long history of collaborating with the Conservatives. The BQ repeatedly provided the Harper Conservatives with the requisite parliamentary votes to retain power during the government's first term (February 2006 to October 2008).

The NDP, until this month, had trumpeted its refusal to support the Conservatives in parliamentary confidence votes. Party leader Jack Layton delighted in contrasting the NDP's purported record of consistent, "principled" opposition to Harper with that of the BQ and especially the Official Opposition Liberals, who have voted for the Conservative

government 79 times in the past three and a half years.

The social democrats emphasized their anti-Conservative voting record all the more during the past two years, as they shifted still further right. First, Layton and his New Democrats abandoned their opposition to Canada's leading role in the Afghan war; then late last fall, they agreed to serve as junior partners in a Liberal-led federal coalition government committed to implementing Harper's C\$50 billion, five-year corporate tax scheme.

At last month's national NDP convention, the leadership brought forward a raft of new right-wing proposals. These included eliminating all taxes on small business and changing the NDP's name to the Democratic Party, so as to emphasize its affinity with the US Democratic Party of Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton and its renunciation of any association, however tenuous, with the notion of independent working class politics. "We want to build a party where Liberals and centrists can feel welcome," explained the NDP's national director Brad Lavigne.

Now, the social democrats, with the full backing of their close allies in the trade union bureaucracy, have thrown a lifeline to the Harper Conservatives, thus providing further proof, were it needed, that the NDP is an integral part of the Canadian political establishment and entirely beholden to big business.

Following Friday's vote, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe claimed his party's support for the Conservatives was a one-time event, motivated by its anxiety to see parliament approve a time-limited, tax-rebate program for home renovation. Duceppe dismissed the Conservatives' proposal to temporarily "enhance" EI, saying Bill C-50 will do nothing for workers in Quebec's hard-pressed forest industry, and he all but committed the BQ to supporting the non-confidence motion the Liberals have pledged to present to parliament when they have an "opposition day" early next month. "If they ask if we have confidence in [the Conservative] government, the answer," said Duceppe, "is clear: N.O.—No."

The NDP, on the other hand, has touted the Conservatives' EI changes as a "step in the right direction," giving legitimacy to what is a cynical, miserly, and in important respects reactionary piece of legislation. According to the government's own estimates, only 190,000 jobless workers will gain from the

legislation, drawing additional benefits of between 5 and 20 weeks depending on the number of years they have paid into EI.

For months, the Conservatives, categorically rejected any and all calls for improving jobless benefits. Harper went so far as to denounce any loosening of EI eligibility requirements or extension of EI eligibility as a “tax increase.” Then, last week, when faced with the prospect of imminent defeat in parliament and a new election, the Conservatives suddenly unveiled a bill to temporarily improve EI. Their patent aim was to provide Layton and the NDP—which for two weeks had been proclaiming their readiness to “make parliament work,” that is, to make a deal to keep the Conservatives in power—with a pretext to prop up the government. And if this gambit failed, the Conservatives calculated that Bill C-50 would boost their efforts to pass themselves off before the electorate as moderate, “compassionate conservatives.”

In drafting Bill C-50, the Conservatives ignored not only all the proposals for improving EI coverage made by advocates for the jobless, but all the suggestions made by the NDP and the other two opposition parties. These included establishing a uniform and reduced eligibility standard of 360 hours, providing coverage to part-time workers, and extending the number of weeks jobless workers can draw benefits.

Bill C-50 is based on the Victorian notion of the deserving and undeserving poor. Anyone who has drawn more than 35 weeks of EI over the past 5 years—that is, all seasonal workers and a large number of those laid off from forest, auto, and other manufacturing jobs—and anyone who has not paid significant EI premiums in seven of the last 10 years—young and low-paid workers—is denied any extension in their EI eligibility.

Even union bureaucrats like Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) President Ken Lewenza have characterized Bill C-50 as “crumbs.” But that has not stopped the CAW or the unions as a whole from supporting the NDP’s decision to prop up the Harper government

As for Layton, he curtly denounced the criticism of Bill C-50 from his union allies and even a few of his own MPs, saying the NDP will continue to press for improvements to EI coverage through private members’ bills. “It’s true,” said the NDP leader, “there are a lot of people who need help that this legislation will not give them, but we have 12 bills before the House of Commons to try and correct the issues with EI, in order to help seasonal workers for example.” This is a ruse. Layton knows full well that because the government controls parliament’s legislative agenda, private members’ bills habitually do not come before parliament for a vote.

NDP insiders concede that the real motivation for their sudden about-face in respect to supporting the Harper government is fear of electoral losses. Recent opinion polls place support for the NDP below, and in some cases, significantly below, the 18 percent share of the popular vote it won in the October 2008 election.

That the NDP has been unable to gain in popular support under conditions of the greatest crisis of world capitalism and growing signs of working class resistance, as in the Inco and Toronto city workers’ anti-concession strikes, speaks volumes about the social democrats’ relationship to the working class. Among broad layers of the population, the NDP is rightly identified with impotence, parliamentary maneuvering, the imposition of right-wing austerity measures (as in Ontario, BC, and Saskatchewan, where it held power in the 1990s), and the betrayals of the trade union bureaucracy.

But the NDP’s rallying behind the Conservatives should not be attributed solely to electoral opportunism. The social democrats are responding to, and seeking to uphold, the consensus opinion of Canada’s ruling elite. Big business does not favor a federal election at present, because it calculates that it will likely result in another minority government, when what it wants is a majority government able to take unpopular decisions.

This was baldly spelt out in a recent column written by Jeffrey Simpson, the *Globe and Mail*’s senior commentator on national affairs, and titled “If we must go to the polls, please no more minority governments.” Wrote Simpson, “[A]s Canada crawls out of the recession and confronts the debt it has incurred hard decisions will be required.... Only a majority government, or maybe a German-like ‘grand coalition’ of Conservatives and Liberals would have the political guts to make those hard decisions. Another minority, Conservative or Liberal, would choose the paths of least resistance and avoid hard decisions.”

The NDP leadership is also acutely sensitive to the extent and strength of the opposition last fall’s abortive NDP-Liberal coalition aroused within the ruling class and is anxious to demonstrate that, Harper’s shrill denunciations of the “socialist” NDP notwithstanding, they can and ought to be trusted with a share of power. By overcoming “partisan and ideological differences” to support the Harper Conservative government, the social democrats are seeking to prove to the bourgeoisie that they can be trusted to faithfully uphold its interests, that opposition to the NDP’s participation in a future coalition government is unwarranted.

The events of the past year—the NDP’s alliance first with the Liberals and now with the Conservatives—underscore the urgency of the working class launching the struggle to build a new political party, not an electoral party, but a party of class struggle and socialist policies, in opposition to the social democrats and union bureaucrats.



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