One year since Canada's constitutional coup

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One year ago today, Canada's minority Conservative government in conjunction with the un-elected governor-general shut down Canada's parliament for two months so as to prevent the opposition parties from defeating the government in a non-confidence vote.

The governor-general's action was patently undemocratic. The opposition parties had won a majority of the votes and seats in a federal election held less than two months before. But the short-circuiting of parliament was strongly supported by Canada's ruling elite.

Recognizing this, the opposition parties, including the social-democratic NDP and their trade union allies, meekly submitted to the December 4, 2008 constitutional coup and when parliament reconvened in late January the Official Opposition Liberals, to all but universal support from the corporate media, voted to sustain the Conservatives in office.

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, by contract, had vowed in a nationally televized speech on the eve of his formal request to the governor-general for parliament to be suspended to "use every legal means" at his disposal to remain in power, while terming the attempt of the opposition parties to form a coalition government a threat to Canada's "national unity" and "democracy." As the World Socialist Web Site *explained at the time, Harper's actions raised "the question as to how far he and his fellow Conservatives are prepared to go in subverting parliamentary and democratic procedures."*

In the coming days and week, the World Socialist Web Site *will post several articles and comments on last year's political-constitutional crisis in Canada.*

We begin with an article written by Keith Jones, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada). Titled "Canada: Vital lessons from last month's political crisis, it was originally posted on January 26, 2009.

Canada's parliament will reconvene today seven-and-a-half weeks after it was shut down by the unelected governor-general at the behest of the minority Conservative government and big business.

The proroguing of parliament was a flagrant attack on parliamentary norms and democratic rights. Its explicit purpose was to prevent the Members of Parliament (MPs) from defeating the Conservative government in a December 8 non-confidence vote and authorizing the formation of an alternate government—a Liberal-NDP coalition supported from the "outside" by the Bloc Québécois.

The opposition parties had joined forces in response to the government's November 27 fiscal and economic update. The update slashed public expenditure even as Canada's economy was being rocked by world recession and Canada's rivals were rushing to boost their manufacturers and other sections of business with economic stimulus packages.

A crisis has the salutary impact of laying bare the real relations between, and the trajectory of, different parties and social classes. Irrespective of what happens in parliament this week—the Liberals have repeatedly voiced their readiness to abandon the coalition and sustain the current government in office if the Conservatives will only heed their calls for a "substantial" economic stimulus—it is crucial that working people ponder the significance of the extraordinary events of late November and early December 2008.

There are at least three vital lessons.

First, in pursuit of its class interests the Canadian bourgeoisie is ready to run roughshod over fundamental democratic rights.

The shutting down of parliament was, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously explained, a "constitutional coup." Through the reactionary office of the governor-general (that is the representative of Canada's monarch, Queen Elizabeth II), the ruling class succeeded in short-circuiting parliament to prevent an outcome it deemed undesirable.

Under Canada's parliamentary system, it is the MPs, the reputed elected representatives of the Canadian people, who choose the government and a government is constitutionally compelled to resign if it is demonstrated to have lost parliament's "confidence." Yet last month MPs who had been elected in a federal election less than two months before were prevented by the executive—the minority government acting in collusion with the unelected governor-general—from exercising their right to unseat and replace the government.

There is no precedent in modern Canadian history or that of any other country with a British-style parliamentary democracy for parliament being prorogued for the express purpose of avoiding defeat in an impending non-confidence vote. That opposition parties enjoying the support of a majority of MPs had formally informed governor-general Michaëlle Jean of their intention to defeat the Conservatives and form an alternate government only underscores the arbitrary and anti-democratic character of her decision to shut down parliament.

In clinging to office, the Conservatives mounted a vicious right-wing campaign, claiming the proposed coalition would serve as an instrument of "socialists" and "separatists" and suggesting it was quasi-treasonous. Even supporters of the proroguing of parliament such as the *Globe and Mail* had to concede that the Conservatives were inciting anti-Quebec chauvinism.

The Conservatives' failure to include measures to stimulate the economy in their November 27 economic update caused widespread dismay and dissatisfaction within the ruling class. But it quickly became apparent that Canada's elite was opposed, at this juncture, to the coming to power of a coalition government in which the trade union-supported NDP would serve as junior partner and which would depend on the *indépendantiste* Bloc Quebecois (BQ) for its parliamentary majority.

When it became clear that the only way to prevent the coalition from coming to power was to shut down parliament, the ruling class—as attested by the editorial pages of the country's leading newspapers—overwhelmingly supported such action. No matter that it was a flagrant violation of the precepts of Canada's parliamentary democracy.

The Liberals got the message. Within days of parliament being shut down, the Liberals expedited the exit of Stéphane Dion as party leader and replaced him with Michael Ignatieff, the acknowledged leader of the party's right wing and a "coalition skeptic."

Last month's constitutional coup must serve as a warning to the working

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class. If the ruling class is willing to trample on basic democratic principles and shut down parliament so as to prevent the coming to power of a coalition led by the Liberals, its traditional party of government, what authoritarian measures will it employ if faced with a genuine challenge from the working class?

One final point should be made about last month's constitutional coup. The media and all the opposition parties have enveloped the actions of the governor-general in a blanket of silence.

Apart from a single column by the *Globe and Mail's* Lawrence Martin, no influential newspaper or journalist has called on the governor-general to explain her actions or, for that matter, to reveal what transpired during the two-and-a-half hour, December 4 meeting at which Prime Minister Stephen Harper sought and she granted him the order proroguing parliament.

Canadians have been led to believe that the office of the governor-general is a regal decoration, a relic, that stands above politics. But as last month's events demonstrated, the governor-general has vast reserve powers. The bourgeoisie, with the complicity of the opposition parties, wants to ensure that this reactionary institution is not subject to public scrutiny and debate—does not become "politicized"—so it can be deployed to uphold its interests in future crises of a more fundamental character.

Second, the trade unions and social-democratic NDP have responded to the capitalist crisis by moving still further right.

The eruption of the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression and the descent of the world economy into recession underscore the urgency of the working class advancing its own program to resolve the crisis at the expense of big business, not working people. To defend their jobs, wages and rights, the working class must challenge the capitalist order, the subordination of socioeconomic life to the socially destructive pursuit of profit by the tiny plutocracy that controls the bulk of society's wealth.

The unions and the NDP, the purported organizations of working people, are utterly opposed to such a struggle.

In the name of securing an economic stimulus package that will protect working people from the economic crisis, the NDP with the full support of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the Quebec unions have announced their intention to support a Liberal-led coalition government.

In fact the NDP and CLC were instrumental in putting together the coalition, serving as interlocutors between the Liberals and BQ, longtime bitter rivals. And the unions and NDP have continued to cling to the coalition even as the new Liberal leader, Michael Ignatieff, has distanced himself from it and signaled his preference for a de facto Liberal-Conservative coalition.

Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) president Michel Arsenault lavished praise on Ignatieff last week after the Liberal leader visited the union's Montreal headquarters. In reference to Ignatieff, Arsenault said, "We need somebody who believes that government has to reinvest in infrastructure, has to reinvest in the economy." But while the QFL leader was imploring Ignatieff to bring down the Conservatives, the Liberal leader was declaring, "I think the Canadian public demands that I give him [Prime Minister Harper] one last chance to win back the confidence of the Commons."

NDP leader Jack Layton has been anxious to assure the press that the coalition is alive and well. "I think it's a happy marriage and we had a nice cup of coffee and a good discussion," Layton told CTV following a closed door meeting with Ignatieff January 13.

A Liberal-NDP coalition would be a right-wing government that under the cover of "progressive" phrases would press forward with the anti-worker and anti-democratic agenda pursued by its predecessors, the Harper Conservative government and the Liberal governments of Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien.

To secure the Liberals' support, the NDP not only had to agree to the Liberals' controlling three-quarters of the seats in cabinet, including the posts of prime minister and finance minister; the NDP also pledged to implement the Liberal-Conservative plan to reduce corporate taxes by $50 billion over five years and to support Canada waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

The coalition's policy accord begins by affirming the Liberals' and NDP's commitment to "fiscal responsibility"—a euphemism for declaring their subservience to big business and its mantra of "international competitiveness" and their opposition to any serious redistribution of wealth in favor of working people. The accord's second paragraph begins, "This policy accord is built on a foundation of fiscal responsibility."

The accord goes on to proclaim the parties' "top priority" to be "an economic stimulus package." But the proposed stimulus measures, such as spending on infrastructure, are vague, made dependent on the government's financial capacity, and are entirely from the standpoint of reviving Canada's capitalist economy, of making it profitable for big business to operate.

What this means for working people is exemplified by the auto industry "bailout." The Canadian bailout put together by the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments, like the US bailout, is conditional on the wages and benefits of workers at the Detroit Three's Canadian plants being reduced to the level paid nonunion workers at the Japanese transplant operations in the southern US.

The Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), one of the most vocal supporters of the Liberal-NDP coalition, has already signaled its readiness to accept such concessions in the interests of "protecting" workers from the crisis!

In justifying their allying with the big business Liberals, the social-democratic politicians of the NDP and the union bureaucrats invariably point to the rapacious anti working-class character of the Harper Conservative government. But the Harper government has only continued and extended the policies of the Liberal governments that preceded it—from the redistribution of wealth to the most privileged layers of society via tax cuts, through the expansion of the Canadian Armed Forces and the war in Afghanistan.

If the Liberals have long served as the Canadian bourgeoisie's principal party of government, it is precisely because of their ability, with the complicity of the unions and NDP, to use the Conservatives as a right-wing foil, while implementing the program of big business.

Third, the petty bourgeois left trails in the wake of the union bureaucracy and the NDP.

Canada's ostensible "radical" left was quick to embrace the Liberal led coalition as a "lesser evil." The prominent anti-globalization activist Naomi Klein, feminist media-personality and rabble.ca co-founder Judy Rebick, and Amir Khadir and the left Quebec sovereignist *Québec solidaire* all welcomed the coalition. So too did the Stalinist Communist Party of Canada.

Taking their cue from the NDP and the Liberals, the radicals have said little if anything about the Conservatives' constitutional coup and its broader significance

Some self-avowed "revolutionary socialist" groups have denounced the coalition. However, they do so from the standpoint of seeking to perpetuate the influence of the unions and the NDP over the working class. The coalition, they complain, will prevent the unions and NDP from playing their supposed true role as instruments of working- class struggle.

"Locked inside a Liberal-dominated coalition," declares John Riddell of *Socialist Voice*, "the NDP would be unable to campaign against capitalist attacks. Accepting responsibility for the anti-labour measures of such a government could rapidly discredit the NDP and end its ability to continue as the bearer of popular hopes for social change."

"At the same time, labour leaders' current pledges of unconditional support to a coalition will undermine the unions' ability to act independently in defence of workers' rights and needs."

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“Campaign against capitalist attacks”? The NDP and the unions are key props of the capitalist order. They serve to smother and derail working class resistance to big business. Over the past quarter-century, in response to the deepening crisis of capitalism, they have done so ever more openly, imposing concessions and job cuts and in the case of the NDP, presiding over the dismantling of the welfare state.

The liberation of the working class from these organizations and the building of new organs of working-class struggle is an essential element in the struggle to develop an independent political movement of the working class for socialism.

Whatever happens in parliament this week, the political crisis that erupted late last year under the initial impact of the world economic crisis presages a new era of intensified class struggle and political shocks. In preparing for these, it is vital that workers assimilate the lessons of the rapid rallying of the NDP and the unions to the big business Liberal Party and the subsequent constitutional coup engineered by the Conservatives and the governor-general and supported by the most powerful sections of Canadian capital.

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