

Protests against shutdown of Canadian parliament

A socialist policy to defend democratic rights

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)

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Demonstrations and rallies are being held in cities across Canada this Saturday to protest against the minority Conservative government's two-month shutdown of parliament.

While the protest movement against prorogation was initiated from outside the political establishment and its official "left flank" (the unions, NDP, and groups like rabble.ca), it has now been appropriated by "the Anybody but Harper" bourgeois opposition. Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff and NDP leader Jack Layton have endorsed the protests, as has the Green Party's Elizabeth May.

In opposition to these forces, the Socialist Equality Party insists that the turn of the Harper Conservative government and Canada's ruling elite as whole toward more authoritarian forms of rule cannot be defeated by appealing to establishment parties to defend and reform bourgeois parliamentary institutions that are crumbling under the impact of the capitalist crisis.

What is required is the independent political intervention of the working class on the basis of its own program—a program that fuses the defence of democratic rights with the struggle to defend jobs and public services and against imperialist war.

The proroguing of parliament was an anti-democratic maneuver: the culmination of a three-year campaign to prevent public exposure of the Canadian government's and military's complicity in the torture of hundreds of Afghan detainees.

Previously the Harper Conservative government had sought to shut down an inquiry by the Military Police Complaints Commission (MPCC) into the Afghan detainee issue; threatened government officials and military personnel who testified before the MPCC with prosecution under the country's draconian national security laws; mounted a campaign of slander and lies against a former top Canadian official in Afghanistan who testified that the government and Canadian Armed Forces' top brass had suppressed his repeated warnings about Canada's complicity in torture; and defied a House of Commons resolution ordering it to turn over key documents concerning the Afghan detainees.

Last month's prorogation of parliament grew out of an even more egregious attack on democratic rights.

Thirteen months ago, the Conservatives carried out a veritable constitutional coup. Less than two months after a federal election, they prevailed upon the unelected and unaccountable Governor-General to use the vast arbitrary powers of her office to prorogue parliament so as to prevent the opposition parties from exercising their democratic right to defeat the government in an impending non-confidence vote.

Never before in modern times had the parliament of Canada or, for that matter, any country with a British-derived parliamentary system

been shut down for the explicit purpose of avoiding a confidence vote. Yet this flagrant breach of democratic norms and parliamentary practice was overwhelmingly supported by big business and its media.

The Conservatives' use of prorogation to undemocratically cling to power and cover up their commission of war crimes was the culmination of a decade of mounting attacks on democratic rights—attacks often spearheaded by the Liberals.

Canada's complicity in torture is by no means limited to Afghanistan. As was illustrated by the cases of Maher Arar and Abousfian Abdelrazik, to name only the best known, Canada's security agencies have colluded in the torture of Canadian citizens by foreign governments. This included inciting the foreign arrest of Canadians as a means to get round constitutional prohibitions on detention without trial and the use of "aggressive" interrogation techniques. The Harper government, like the Liberal government that preceded it, has defended the Guantanamo Bay detention of Omar Khadr, who was seized by the US at the age of 14 and is being prosecuted as an act of vengeance by the US military and state against his late father.

Under Canada's omnibus anti-terror legislation longstanding juridical principles were overturned, including an accused's right to a public trial, full disclosure of the prosecution's evidence, and the presumption of innocence. The powers and budgets of the RCMP and CSIS have been dramatically expanded, and the establishment has increasingly portrayed dissent as suspect if not criminal, while extolling the armed forces and their imperialist interventions abroad as the "bulwarks of our democratic freedoms."

Federal and provincial governments continue the now decades-old practice of "suspending" workers' basic union rights to negotiate collectively and strike, virtually at will.

This process is paralleled by developments in all the other advanced capitalist countries. In the US, the Republicans sought to use a sex scandal to unseat Bill Clinton; then, with the sanction of the US Supreme Court, stole the 2000 election. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and trumped up claims of weapons of mass destruction were used to stampede the US into illegal wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq and to vastly expand the powers of the state and the national security apparatus, effectively laying the groundwork for a police state. A new lexicon was created as hitherto illegal practices were given state sanction—extraordinary rendition, enemy combatant, Patriot Act ...

Behind this universal assault on democratic rights lie deepening and explosive class cleavages. The past quarter century has seen a vast growth in social inequality and economic insecurity, as the various rival national bourgeoisies, locked in a ferocious struggle for markets and profits, seek to expand their wealth and geo-political power.

Governments, whether nominally of the left or right, have pursued social reaction at home—the dismantling of the welfare state, privatization and deregulation, and tax cuts designed to enrich the most privileged layers—while pursuing imperialist war abroad

It is widely conceded by the corporate media that Canada's parliamentary system is in crisis. But when the ruling elite speaks of a dysfunctional parliament it means something entirely different from the attitude of working people.

Workers are angered by the fact that whichever party holds power in Ottawa and the provinces, governments pursue the same basic program of restructuring Canadian society to ensure the “competitiveness,” i.e. profitability, of big business.

When the corporate media decries the “inertia” and “political jockeying” in Ottawa, Toronto or Quebec City, it is expressing anger and frustration at the extent to which the inter-party competition for popular support constitutes an encumbrance to pressing forward with big business's agenda—and this under conditions where all of the parliamentary parties are beholden to the existing social order.

To return again to the December 2008 constitutional coup: if the ruling elite was willing to short-circuit parliamentary democracy so as to prevent the coming to power of a coalition led by the Liberals, its traditional governing party, how would it respond if confronted with a genuine challenge to its rule from the working class?

Working people must beware the political agenda of those who have rallied round the “grassroots” opposition to prorogation and who are now seeking to place their political stamp on it—the trade union bureaucracy, the social-democrats and liberals of rabble.ca, the nationalist Council of Canadians and the Green Party.

These forces are seeking to channel the mounting opposition to the unresponsiveness of the political system to the needs of working people and the open breaches with democratic practices behind the traditional political establishment. Many are actively working to revive the abortive Liberal-NDP coalition of December 2008

It is not accidental or incidental that the principal slogan these forces have advanced for Saturday's demonstration is one that has been employed countless times against striking workers and is suggestive not of an emancipatory movement but of a reactionary, petty bourgeois mobilization of irate taxpayers: “Get back to work!”

This slogan is aimed not at alerting working people to the ruling class attack on democratic rights, but at promoting the bourgeoisie's claim that the parliamentarians—the vast majority of them Conservative and Liberal MPs and appointed senators—are the “people's representatives.”

The central problem facing the working class is that it has been systematically politically disenfranchised. All of the parties—and this goes for the trade union-supported NDP—have participated in the ongoing assault against the working class.

What is urgently required is the development of an independent political movement of the working class. All of the struggles of working people—against factory closures, cuts to public and social services, university tuition hikes, and police violence—must be united into a political challenge to the existing social order, under which economic and political power is wielded by a capitalist oligarchy.

To reiterate, the Liberals and NDP, whether together or separately, represent no genuine alternative to the Harper Conservatives. They are both defenders of the capitalist order and as such implacably opposed to the mobilization of the working class in defence of democratic rights and against the destruction of jobs, living standards, and public

and social services. The same needs to be said of the BQ and its sister party the Parti Quebecois.

The Harper government has only expanded and extended the rightwing agenda of the Chretien-Martin Liberal government that preceded it. During their twelve years in office, the Liberals imposed the greatest public spending cuts in history, soon to be followed by massive tax cuts geared to boosting corporate profits and the incomes of the wealthiest sections of society. At the behest of the military, they shut down the public inquiry into CAF torture in Somalia, sent the CAF to war in Yugoslavia and southern Afghanistan, and initiated a vast expansion and rearmament of the Canadian armed forces.

The Liberals' commitment to democratic rights is exemplified by its leader Michael Ignatieff, who is infamous for the role he played internationally as a “liberal” advocate of the Iraq war and as an apologist for the Bush administration's use of torture.

As for the NDP, Canada's social-democratic party and its trade union allies have responded to the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression by lurching further right. In Dec. 2008 the NDP proclaimed its readiness to join a Liberal-led coalition government committed to implementing the Conservatives \$50 billion corporate tax-cut scheme and waging war in Afghanistan. Last September, the social democrats made a deal, in the name of “making parliament work,” to keep the Harper Conservative government in office.

When the Conservatives carried out their constitutional coup in December 2008, the unions and NDP meekly submitted. Their initial response to Harper's latest prorogation was equally tepid. They only bestirred themselves after there was a public outcry and sections of the corporate media criticized the latest shutting down of parliament. If establishment voices like the *Globe and Mail* did so, it is because they think that the Conservatives are needlessly bringing discredit on the office of the Governor-General—whose sweeping powers they want deployed only in time of real crisis, the better to preserve the illusion that “the people rule.”

Working people in Canada should critically review the record of US President Barack Obama. The unions, liberals and all-manner of self-styled lefts rallied round Obama claiming that the big business Democrats were the only viable opposition to the Republican right. Yet the Obama administration has continued and even carried forward Bush's policies, expanding the war in Afghanistan, providing vast sums to the financial aristocracy in the form of the bank bailouts, and joining with Harper and Ontario Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty to impose sweeping cuts in wages, jobs and benefits on auto workers.

The defence of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to the representatives of the ruling elite. It requires the independent political mobilization of the working class in opposition to all the parties of big business and the capitalist social order.

The Socialist Equality Party appeals to all workers and youth who agree with this program to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and join our ranks.



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