

# Canada: NDP will abet big business in imposing its class war agenda

Keith Jones  
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Make no mistake, whichever party or combination of parties emerges as Canada's government in the aftermath of the May 2 election, it will serve as the spearhead of an intensified big business assault on the rights and social position of the working class.

The just-concluded federal election campaign has been political theater, with the politicians and corporate media straining to exaggerate the small policy differences that separate the four major parties—the governing Conservatives, the Liberals, the NDP and the Bloc Québécois.

All of the parties have taken up big business' cry for "austerity," pledging to balance the federal budget within four years. All oppose any reduction in the \$23 billion military budget even though Canada is currently spending more on its military (even after discounting for inflation) than at any time since World War II.

All are adamant that there is no money to finance Pharmacare or fund a national public works program aimed at repairing the country's crumbling infrastructure and ensuring full employment. None proposes to raise taxation on the rich and super-rich although the taxation rates on the wealthy's swelling incomes have been slashed by governments of all stripes for well over a decade. Indeed, the richest 1 percent of Canadians have long paid proportionately less of their incomes in taxes than the poorest 10 percent of income taxpayers.

In an action that exemplifies their fundamental unity, the four parties unanimously supported the Conservative government's decision to join the imperialist assault on Libya the same week that the government fell. They then effectively excluded from the election campaign any debate about the leading role Canada is playing in the Afghan and Libyan wars.

No less importantly, all four parties are deceiving the public as to the extent of the global capitalist crisis and masking the preparations of the ruling elite to dramatically intensify the assault on the working class.

All around the world, from Britain, France, and Greece to the United States, the ruling elite has responded to the 2008 financial crash and subsequent global slump by launching a drive to destroy what remains of the social benefits that the working class wrenched from big business through titanic social struggles in the last century.

While corporations are demanding contract concessions and speed-up, governments are slashing public health care, education and other services, gutting pensions, raising the retirement age, and seeking to criminalize worker resistance.

The Canadian ruling class has the same agenda and from its standpoint cannot do otherwise if it is not to lose out in the global inter-capitalist competition for profits, markets and investments.

In its last two budgets, Quebec's Liberal government slashed social

spending, raised university tuitions and electricity rates and a host of other charges, and imposed a new head-type health-care tax. Ontario's provincial Liberal government has recently struck a task force headed by a vice president of the Toronto-Dominion Bank to draft plans to radically downsize the province's public sector.

In recent months a parade of business leaders and business lobby groups, rightwing think-tanks, retired politicians, and newspaper editorialists have demanded that Canadians hold "an adult conversation" on health care. Claiming that the existing public health care system is financially "unsustainable," big business and its ideological representatives are demanding that responsibility for funding health care be shifted from the state to individuals and their families. Furthermore, in the name of "efficiency," they are pressing for private, for-profit companies to be given a much greater role in the provision of medical services.

In a ruling issued last Friday, Canada's Supreme Court has effectively declared open season on worker rights. It upheld an Ontario law forbidding farm workers from unionizing, but its ruling has much wider implications. Canada's highest court has now proclaimed that workers have no constitutional right to bargain collectively, let alone strike. The "freedom of association" guarantees in Canada's Charter of Rights are limited to the "right" of workers to form an association that from time to time can air workers' grievances to their employers. There is no legal compulsion for the employers to negotiate or in any way address these grievances.

The assault on the working class goes hand in hand with the turn to militarism. Like its capitalist rivals, the Canadian bourgeoisie views military power and war as essential in advancing its interests and global ambitions under conditions where the US's economic and geopolitical domination has been massively eroded by its longtime economic decline and the rise of new powers, especially in Asia.

The working class must take a sharp warning from the events of December 2008.

The ruling class overwhelmingly supported Harper and his Conservatives when they prevailed upon the unelected and unaccountable Governor-General to use the vast arbitrary powers of her office to shut down parliament so as to prevent the opposition parties from exercising their democratic right to defeat the government in an impending non-confidence vote.

During the current election campaign Harper has not only defended this constitutional coup, he has continued to attempt to arbitrarily and illegally rewrite the rules of Canadian democracy. The Conservative leader has repeatedly asserted that even if the party with most seats in parliament does not have the support of the majority of MPs it alone has the right to form a government. Just as significantly, Harper's

claims have passed virtually unchallenged in the corporate media.

The ruling elite is increasingly indifferent to and hostile to democratic norms because they constitute an obstacle to the pursuit of its class war agenda. Indeed, Canada's most influential daily, the *Globe and Mail*, cited the "bullheadedness" of Harper and his government—that is, their readiness to disregard and defy public opinion and run roughshod over parliamentary norms and democratic rights—as one of the principal reasons they should be returned to office.

Recognizing that the traditional governing parties—the Liberals, the Conservatives and in Quebec the sovereignist movement (which runs federally under the banner of the BQ and provincially as the Parti Quebecois)—are indifferent to their interests, record numbers of youth and working people will vote for the trade union-based NDP on May 2.

But their hopes and aspirations will be bitterly betrayed. The NDP, which functions in close collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy, is not a means for pressuring the parties of big business or beating back the ruling class offensive now popularly identified with the neoconservative ideologue Stephen Harper. Rather it is an instrument of the Canadian bourgeoisie for disorganizing the working class.

When the NDP has held office in Canada's provinces, it has come into headlong conflict with the working class, most infamously in Ontario in the 1990s. Like now, workers in Ontario suddenly turned to the NDP in 1990 under conditions of a mounting economic crisis in anticipation that it would shield them from the economic slump. Instead the NDP government of Bob Rae shredded its milquetoast reform platform, cut social spending, and imposed a wage- and job-cutting "social contract" on one million workers. This betrayal disgusted much of their electorate who abandoned them in droves. The NDP's treachery ultimately paved the way for the coming to power of Mike Harris' ultra-right wing Conservative government.

While the arch-reactionaries at the *National Post* and the *Sun* tabloids are frothing at the mouth over the increased support for the "socialist" NDP, the more perceptive and honest bourgeois commentators are well aware that in the NDP the Canadian ruling elite has a pliant tool that, like the union bureaucracy, can be relied upon to channel discontent into safe channels, suppress the class struggle, and facilitate, as it did in the case of the Afghan and Libyan Wars, the deployment of the Canadian Armed Forces in imperialist war.

In a column last Wednesday, the *Globe and Mail's* senior political columnist Jeffrey Simpson conceded that the policy differences that separate the NDP and Liberals from the Conservatives are minor: "In this campaign, amid all the venomous attack ads and excessive rhetoric you can hear the silence of agreement. Most of the agreeing is on Stephen Harper's terms... [T]he squabbling over taxes and revenues are really at the margin of what Ottawa spends and raises in a given year."

And the NDP leadership has responded to the surge in the party's support and the increasing attention now being accorded it by the ruling elite by moving still further right. Last week, after he came under attack for criticizing the Canadian central bank's interest rate policy, NDP leader Jack Layton rushed to declare that the NDP supports and upholds the autonomy of the Bank of Canada.

In an interview with Canadian Press Sunday, Layton announced that he will be contacting the Liberals and Conservatives immediately following the election to discuss a coalition or other form of alliance:

"The essence of that plan is to phone all the other leaders and say this is what we'd like to accomplish, depending on the scenarios, hoping we're in the leadership position," Layton emphasized he is ready to join, support or lead a government with any of the parties "if there's a dance partner—if [Conservative Prime Minister] Stephen Harper happens to be there, (or) another leader."

On Saturday the *Toronto Star*, the traditional mouthpiece of the country's liberal establishment published an editorial that endorsed the NDP in Monday's election, while calling for a strategic vote for Liberal candidates especially in the Toronto area who could prevent the election of Conservatives. In its endorsement the *Star* praised the NDP for its "credible," i.e. pro-business platform, while urging the federal NDP to "accept the challenge" of staking out even more right positions as the "pragmatic," "successful" NDP provincial governments have done.

The shake-up in Canada's official politics—the surge in support for the NDP and the erosion in support for the Liberals, long the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government—are a distorted expression of the intensification of class tensions.

In the coming period, as the bourgeoisie moves to impose its reactionary agenda, these tensions will find expression in the eruption of mass social struggles.

But if the working class is to put an end to the past quarter century of bitter reversals and defeats, it must break free politically and organizationally of those, beginning with the unions and NDP, who work to subordinate it to the capitalist profit system and serve, therefore, as enforcers of austerity and recruiting sergeants for imperialist war.

All the diverse struggles of working people against plant closures and social spending cuts must be fused into an independent political movement of the working class aimed at bringing to power a workers' government committed to radically reorganizing socioeconomic life so that production is based on social need, not profit.

Full coverage of the 2011 Canadian election



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