Canada’s NDP leader forced to temporarily step down:

Jack Layton’s right-wing record

Richard Dufour
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Jack Layton announced earlier this week that he will temporarily step down as head of Canada's trade-union supported New Democratic Party in order to undergo cancer treatment. After a successful battle against prostrate cancer last year, Layton is facing a second, unidentified, form of the disease that has left him in a visibly diminished state, fuelling speculation that he may not resume his functions as Leader of the Official Opposition when Parliament begins its next session in mid-September.

Press commentary has focused on Layton's personal charisma which the press pundits claim set him apart from other politicians and played a key role in the NDP's more than 10 percentage-point increase in its share of the vote in the May 2 election. The main point of Layton's affability, however, is to hide the reactionary nature of his politics. He has been instrumental in the transformation of the federal NDP from a party of parliamentary protest into a respectable right-wing bourgeois party that, if called on to assume government responsibilities in Ottawa, would not hesitate to impose the full weight of the capitalist crisis on the backs of the Canadian working class.

As an NDP “strategist” recently put it, Layton has been able to “change the culture of the NDP from one that's not just about being the [country’s] conscience, but that wants to actually win.”

In the press statement he read to announce his leave of absence, Layton stressed that the aim of Canada’s social-democrats is to “replace the Conservative government a few short years from now” by convincing the ruling class that the NDP is ready to fill the role, hitherto played by Liberals, as its “left” party of government.

Since taking over as NDP leader in 2003, Layton has eagerly pursued an alliance with the big business Liberals, Canada's “natural governing party” during the twentieth century.

In 2004, the NDP propped up a minority Liberal government led by Paul Martin, who as Finance Minister in the Chretien Liberal government of the mid 1990s had presided over the deepest social spending cuts in Canadian history. Four years later, in December 2008, Layton signed a formal agreement to enter into a Liberal-led coalition government, agreeing to drop the NDP's bogus calls for a withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan and to implement the Liberal-Conservative plan to reduce corporate taxes by more than $50 billion over five years. And at last month’s federal NDP convention, the party leadership mobilized to defeat a resolution opposing a merger or election pact with the Liberals, saying it needs to have “free hands.”

In his press statement, Layton made clear that any government joined or led by the NDP would continue and deepen the ruling class assault on social programs, insisting that “We CAN have a fiscally responsible government.” As the right-wing *National Post* observed, “Mr Layton has moved the party away from proposals for nationalizing industries, high taxes on the rich or other socialist ideas.”

Layton's other main pledge, in what some commentators have termed his “political testament,” was the affirmation that “We CAN be a force for peace in the world.” The *National Post*, the most rabid supporter of Canadian militarism, was so taken by Layton’s pledge that it made it part of the headline of the main *Post* article on Layton’s temporary retirement. In an accompanying article, it noted that Layton has led his party into “becoming a hearty supporter of the military, although somewhat unclear on what missions it should be used for.”

The NDP supported Canada's counter-insurgency intervention in Afghanistan for many years, providing a cover for the attempt by US imperialism, along with its NATO allies such as Canada, to take control of a strategically-located country in the resource-rich region of Central Asia. Only after anti-war sentiment became widespread, and the prospects of a military defeat of the forces resisting foreign occupation grew dimmer, did the

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NDP issue a call for a gradual and orderly withdrawal of Canadian troops. The Afghan mission, the NDP argued, was draining the resources of the Canadian military and preventing its deployment in other parts of the world.

More recently, in its first major vote as the Official Opposition, the NDP voted to extend Canada's participation in the war against Libya that was initiated by former colonial powers France and Britain with the backing of Washington. The war's aim is to install a regime more pliant to imperialism in a country that is not only a major oil producer but also borders the two North African countries shaken by revolutionary upheavals at the beginning of the year, Tunisia and Egypt. Endorsing the lie that the Libyan war is about protecting civilians, the NDP has emerged once again as a political accomplice in an imperialist war of aggression.

The NDP has never been a party that upholds the independent interests of the working class. Rather it has served as the political voice of privileged layers of the middle class, above all, the trade union bureaucracy. Like social-democratic parties the world over, the NDP has shifted far to the right over the past quarter century shredding even its traditional milquetoast reformist program and unabashedly imposing, when in office in various provincial capitals, capitalist austerity.

Significantly Nycole Turmer, former national president of the Public Sector Alliance of Canada, the largest federal employee union, has been chosen as interim leader of the NDP on Layton's recommendation. The close alliance between the Canadian social-democrats and the treacherous union bureaucracy was on full display last month when the NDP abruptly ended a filibuster campaign to delay passage of the Conservative government’s bill criminalizing job action by 50,000 postal workers and imposing sweeping contract concessions on them.

Just as the unions are playing a direct role in imposing wage and job cuts on workers in the workplace, so the NDP wants to become the party that implements the class war agenda of big business on the political scene.

This is taking place in a definite political context. Despite having won a majority government with the support of barely one out of every four Canadian voters, the Conservatives are pushing forward with an agenda of imperialist war and escalating assault on worker and democratic rights, bringing class tensions in the country to the point of explosion. The Liberals, long the ruling class’ traditional governing party, were routed in the last election and now hold barely 30 seats in the House of Commons. Should the Conservative government falter in the face of mass popular opposition, the Canadian ruling elite will have need of an alternative political instrument so as to press forward with its program of dismantling public and social services, criminalizing dissent, and using the Canadian Armed Forces to assert its predatory interests on the world stage.

This is the significance of a recent editorial by the *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece of Canada's financial elite, hailing Layton's “long and patient struggle” to replace the Liberals as “the centre-left alternative to the Conservatives.” As the 2008 coalition discussions made clear, any government in which the NDP comes to play a major role will be a bourgeois government fully committed to the defence of big business interests at the expense of working people.

In opposition to the NDP and its big business masters, the working class must build its own political party to advance its own, socialist, alternative: the complete reorganization of economic life to make meeting the social needs of the great majority, not the profit interests of the few, its animating principle.

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