

# Canada: The death of Jack Layton and the myth of national solidarity

Richard Dufour  
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The sudden death last week of Jack Layton—the head of the trade union-based New Democratic Party (NDP) and newly minted leader of the Official Opposition—has been made the occasion for a quasi-official celebration of Canadian social democracy and nationalism.

That this was what Layton hoped and aimed for is underscored by the “Letter to Canadians” he wrote with his top aides in the days immediately before his death and which was released to the public just hours after it was announced he had succumbed to cancer.

What critically-minded workers and other socialists need to consider is why the corporate media, Layton’s ostensible political opponents, and the entire establishment—the *National Post* and Sun Media excepted—have chosen to proclaim Layton a veritable national hero.

Within hours of his death, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered Layton’s family a state funeral, a privilege only rarely accorded someone who has not been a prime minister or governor-general or who at death was not serving in the federal cabinet. The *Globe and Mail*, Canada’s newspaper of record, devoted its entire front page last Tuesday to a sketch of Layton and a short excerpt from his “Letter to Canadians.”

All through last week, the TV networks and dailies paid homage to Layton’s life and political career, encouraging the country to mourn his passing as the loss of a tireless advocate of the underprivileged and proponent of principled politics. This culminated Saturday with live coverage of Layton’s state funeral by the CBC, Canada’s government-owned broadcaster, and the two other major English-language television networks.

Light on some of the calculations that lie behind the media campaign to make Layton an object of national adulation is shed by the lengthy editorial the *Globe* published August 23. Titled “Jack Layton: He ennobled politics,” the editorial praises the late NDP leader for

reaching “across partisan lines to work pragmatically” and steering “a temperate course.” Under Layton, enthused the *Globe’s* editors, Canada’s social democrats have moved away from “offering little more than a rote call for more public services and against tax cuts.”

Layton certainly did move the NDP, which decades ago repudiated its milquetoast reformist program, further right. On taking the party leadership in 2003, he charted a course toward making the NDP a party of “government,” by proving to the Canadian ruling class that the NDP is a “moderate,” “fiscally responsible,” “progressive party”—that is, a rightwing bourgeois party.

Under Layton’s leadership, the NDP all but abandoned its timid appeals to the bourgeoisie for increases in social spending and embraced the ruling-class demands for a balanced budget.

On foreign policy, the NDP has provided vital political cover for the Canadian bourgeoisie’s eager participation in US-led military interventions in places as far-flung as Afghanistan, Haiti, and more recently Libya, in the hope of advancing its own predatory geopolitical interests and securing a share in the redistribution of the world’s resources through naked imperialist aggression.

In 2005, Layton struck a deal to keep in power a Liberal government that under Paul Martin and Jean Chretien had carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, then implemented massive tax cuts for big business and the rich. Three years later, Layton agreed to serve in a Liberal-led coalition government that was committed to implementing the Liberal-Conservative scheme to slash corporate taxes by a further \$50 billion and to waging war in Afghanistan for a further three years.

Even the corporate media observed that the NDP’s platform for this year’s federal election differed little from that of the Liberals. It proposed no major social spending initiatives, nor measures to reduce social

inequality, pledged to maintain the current record levels of military spending, and made a tax cut for small business the pivot of its plans for job creation.

Layton's response to the record support the NDP garnered in this May's federal election was to step up his campaign to convince the ruling class that the NDP should be allowed to assume the role hitherto assigned to the Liberals, that is to serve as its "left" party of government. This included a drive at the recent national party convention to expunge the word "socialism" from the NDP constitution.

But the semi-canonization of Layton is not only a response to his repositioning of the NDP. The ruling class recognizes that there is a profound popular alienation from the political establishment and mounting social anger. Moreover, it anticipates that this anger will rapidly intensify as it moves, under conditions of the greatest crisis of the capitalist system since the Great Depression, to further slash jobs and wages and dismantle what remains of the welfare state.

The endless media references to Layton's "pragmatism" and "common touch" point in fact to what made him so valuable an asset for the ruling class, and the real reason *they* are mourning his passing—the ability to put a pretty, populist face on a rightwing political orientation.

The NDP is being groomed and promoted to play a leading role in smothering the class struggle and, should the Harper government falter in the face of popular opposition, to assume direct responsibility for imposing the bourgeoisie's agenda of austerity and war.

As always, key policy shifts are being prepared in corporate boardrooms and ruling circles behind the backs of the Canadian population, shifts the social democrats provide a vital cover for with their claims that power rests in parliament and that it is the forum where the "people's representatives" can "work together" for a "better Canada."

The rejection—and suppression—of the class struggle in favor of a fictitious national solidarity became the specialty of Jack Layton, up until his last moments. Thus in later June he lamented the Conservatives' legislation criminalizing the postal workers' anti-concessions strike, while actively conspiring with the Canadian Labor Congress and Canadian Postal Workers Union to end the strike so as to prevent a head-on clash between the working class and the Harper government.

In his final "Letter to Canadians" Layton wrote, "Canada is great country, one of the hopes of the world.

We can be a better one— a country of greater equality, justice, and opportunity... We can do all of these things because we...have a party system at the national level where there are real choices; where your vote matters; where working for change can actually bring about change."

As to make absolutely clear that he rejected any notion of mobilizing working people in a mass struggle for social equality, Layton's last words were: "My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we'll change the world."

The Canadian bourgeoisie has on its hands the blood of ordinary Afghan and Libyan people. It rounded up and jailed hundreds of young Canadians during the June 2010 G20 summit in Toronto for the sole "crime" of protesting against the devastating economic and social policies being pursued by governments all over the world to appease the world's financial markets. It is now preparing a new round of massive social spending cuts that will leave millions with little or no protection as a severe recession is looming over the entire world economy.

The Canadian bourgeoisie speaks the language, not of "love," "hope" or "optimism"—but of war and social reaction.

Canadian working people must not let themselves be politically chloroformed by the advocates of class reconciliation such as Layton. As the record of the NDP itself so clearly establishes, the social democrats function as priest-like advocates of "social solidarity" when in opposition and as policemen of inequality and capitalist austerity when in office.

Workers and young people in search of a world free of oppression and war must learn to speak the language of socialism and the class struggle. Only through the development of an independent political movement of the working class and the fight for a workers' government can the needs of the vast majority for well-paid jobs and high-quality public health care, education, and other vital public services be secured.



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