

British Columbia NDP courts big business in run-up to provincial vote

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In the run-up to British Columbia's May 14 provincial election, the official opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) is signaling to big business that if it unseats the discredited Liberals, the transfer of power will be a seamless one. Under Adrian Dix, provincial party leader since 2011, the trade union-backed NDP has fashioned itself the "practical" choice for "incremental change," while preparing to continue the austerity policies of Premier Christy Clark's Liberals.

Recent polls show the NDP in the lead with 45 percent support, compared to the Liberals' 36 percent. This has nothing to do with popular enthusiasm for the NDP, but rather the deep hostility of the working class and broad sections of the population for the socially destructive 12-year reign of the Liberals—a coalition of Harper Conservatives, federal Liberals, and one-time supporters of the rightwing populist Social Credit Party. The NDP was itself reduced to just two seats in the 2001 provincial election, after a decade in power under Premiers Mike Harcourt, Glen Clark, and Ujjal Dosanjh, during which it imposed budget and public-sector wage austerity, used legislation to break strikes, imposed new restrictions on teachers' right to strike, and embraced workfare and the "law and order" rhetoric of the right.

Clark, and her predecessor Gordon Campbell, patterned their slash-and-burn social policies on those implemented by Mike Harris and his Conservative Party in Ontario during their "Common Sense Revolution" of the late 1990s. The Campbell and Clark governments have overseen an era of rampant profiteering in the private sector, coupled with soaring social inequality and increasing poverty, homelessness, and economic insecurity.

Dix has emphasized the NDP's support for the huge

deterioration in the social position of the working class over the past three decades, by stressing that he will not make the purported mistake of previous NDP governments of "trying to do too much." With the full support of the trade unions, Dix has been avidly courting big business, pledging that an NDP government will be "business-friendly" and will use its ties to the union bureaucracy to develop a rightwing "consensus."

Dix has green-lit a perfunctory environmental review of the liquified natural gas industry's process of "fracking," to better package the contentious extractive practice for the public palate. He has also offered the film industry generous tax breaks and subsidies, and pledged to exacerbate the depletion of the province's forests by expanding logging.

Three months prior to the election he took the unprecedented step of naming the person who will serve as the head of his transition team and the B.C. civil service, awarding these tasks to Don Wright, a former forest company executive and, reports the *Globe and Mail*, "a senior member of the Business Council of B.C." Dix has also been relying on his one-time boss, former NDP Premier Glen Clark, to open doors for him. Clark is currently the president of billionaire Jim Pattison's sprawling business empire.

Dix used a recent interview with the *Globe* as an opportunity to emphasize his readiness to work with Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who heads Canada's most reactionary federal government since the Great Depression. "I am not running to be leader of the opposition in Ottawa," said Dix. "I'll work closely with the Prime Minister and other premiers to make this a better country."

Big business has made clear that it recognizes the NDP will do its bidding. According to the neo-

conservative *National Post*, the CEO of the Business Council of British Columbia touted his “solid” relationship with “key figures” within the NDP. At the same time, sections of business and the corporate media have encouraged Clark in making wild attacks on the NDP, claiming that they will recklessly increase social spending and are hostile to business, so as to push the social democrats still further right.

The NDP has focused its campaign on the call for more government support for job training, so as to provide skilled workers for the province’s lucrative resource industries. Despite a mounting social crisis caused by years of cuts, the NDP is calling for only minor increases in spending on education, child poverty-reduction, and elderly- and disability-care.

For years, British Columbia has had the highest poverty rate in the country, 12 percent or a whopping 510,000 people. The province also has the second highest child-poverty rate, with 119,000 children, representing 14 percent of all B.C. children, living in poverty.

A significant factor driving up poverty rates is the lack of social housing. Vancouver has become the second most expensive housing market in the world.

Charging that the Liberals’ claim to have balanced the budget is not credible, the NDP plans to couple overall spending restraint with small tax increases for business and the most affluent. While the Liberals announced in their pre-election budget that they were increasing the corporate tax rate by 1 percentage point to 11 percent, the NDP says it will bump it up to 12 percent—still far lower than the 16.5 percent rate in place before the Liberals took office in 2001. Similarly, the NDP is proposing a somewhat larger increase than their Liberal rivals in the highest taxation bracket, after years in which the federal and provincial governments have lavished tax cuts on the rich and super rich.

Eager to disassociate the NDP from calls for social reform, Dix has repeatedly said that he favors not programs to “redistribute wealth” but to “pre-distribute” wealth by helping people get skills and education.

During the past decade, workers in B.C. have repeatedly come forward to challenge the Liberal government, only to have the unions and NDP leaders isolate strikes and impose concession-laden agreements on the rank-and-file. Especially noteworthy were the

December 2003 ferry workers’ and May 2004 hospital workers’ strikes. In both cases, workers struck in defiance of anti-union laws and their militant action threatened to become the catalyst for a province-wide general strike, since large numbers of workers rightly saw them as challenging the hated Liberal regime. In 2012, when the Liberals passed legislation to break a teachers’ walkout, Bill 22, the NDP offered a mealy-mouthed filibuster and colluded with their union backers to force a quick end to the strike.

Whatever the outcome of Tuesday’s election, the working class will quickly come into conflict with B.C.’s next government as it seeks to make working people pay for the global capitalist crisis.



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