Ontario NDP and unions in spat over what rightwing road to follow

Carl Bronski
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The campaign that the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) has mounted for Ontario's June 12 provincial election has been described, not without reason, by wide sections of the corporate media as being to the right of that of the governing big business Liberals.

Earlier this spring, Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath met privately with leading representatives of the financial and manufacturing industries, assuring them, according to the *Globe and Mail*, that an NDP government would do "whatever it takes to bring the province's books back to balance in four years-including cutting government spending and playing tough with public-sector unions."

On the hustings, Horwath has echoed the rightwing populism of disgraced Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, calling for the creation of a "Spending Minister" to ferret out "waste" in health, education and government services. This new ministry, Horwath claims, will cut spending by at least $600 million per year in partial fulfillment of the NDP's pledge to completely eliminate the current $12.5 billion annual provincial budget deficit by 2017.

Horwath is also promising tax cuts for small business and has reassured the banks and corporations that she is committed to preserving Ontario's rock-bottom corporate tax-rates. Even her campaign slogan, "Makes Sense," was deliberately tailored to harken back to the ultra-right "Common Sense Revolution" campaign carried out by the Mike Harris provincial Conservatives in the 1990s.

Horwath's stance has aroused much consternation and anger in NDP circles, including among the union officialdom, longtime party insiders, and self-styled progressive activists. Many are reportedly sitting out the campaign.

But this opposition is itself utterly rightwing. In the name of blocking the coming to power of the Conservatives, Horwath's union and "progressive" critics advocate closer collaboration between the unions, the NDP and Premier Kathleen Wynne and her Liberals in overseeing massive public service cuts and a tax regime tailored to big business and the rich.

Most of the union bureaucracy vehemently objected to the NDP's decision to oppose the provincial budget the minority Liberal government announced May 1—a decision that made an election inevitable since the Conservatives had long-vowed that they would bring down the Wynne government at the earliest opportunity.

At the unions' urging, the NDP had sustained the Liberals in office since October 2011 and done so as they implemented social spending cuts even bigger than those implemented by the Harris Conservatives and further reduced corporate taxes. The NDP-Liberal cuts included a two-year Ontario public sector wage freeze that was enforced through legislation (Bill 115) that criminalized any and all job action by the province's public school teachers.

In a transparent election ploy, the Liberals included a handful of modest social spending increases in their 2014-15 budget and slightly increased taxes on the top 2 percent of income earners. This was enough for the likes of Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) President Sid Ryan and Jerry Dias, the head of Unifor, Canada's largest industrial union, to laud the Liberals for authoring an "NDP budget" and ending the age of austerity.

The former claim, given the NDP's rightwing record wherever it has held office and Horwath's own praise of the budget, was probably an apt characterization. The latter, on the other hand was a gross lie. The Liberals' latest budget reduced social spending by a billion dollars from the projections in the previous austerity budget and promised still further cuts, user fee increases, and a major privatization push in the years to come—and this in a province that already has Canada's lowest per capita social spending.

With the election underway, Gerald Caplan, a long-time member of the NDP establishment, penned a column in the *Globe and Mail* to denounce Horwath and the party inner circle for rejecting Wynne's budget and leaving thereby "many of the party's most loyal supporters … bewildered, frustrated and exasperated." Describing the NDP's election platform as "wooing business'' and ignoring those most in need whilst unnecessarily "slamming" the Liberals, Caplan bemoaned the possibility that the end result could be the election of Tim Hudak and his Conservatives. The day after the article appeared, a letter signed by 34 prominent social democrats (the so-called "Gang of 34") was leaked to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. It reiterated Caplan's complaints about the NDP defeating a Liberal government that had just tabled "the most progressive budget in recent Ontario history,"

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with the added *caveat* that its authors, all life-long NDP voters, announced that they "are seriously considering" not supporting the party on June 12.

The growing fissures within the union bureaucracy and social democracy over what rightwing road to follow have caused concern among the various pseudo-Marxist groups that buzz around the edges of the NDP in the hopes of "pressuring" the social democrats to return to the reformist Keynesian policies they espoused in the post Second World War boom.

With the NDP lurching ever further right, they have had to tie themselves into political knots to justify their continued calls for workers and socialist-minded youth to vote for the NDP and politically remain in its thrall.

Thus the International Socialists (IS)—the Canadian co-thinkers of the British SWP and US-based ISO—write that the ever rightward shift of the NDP is no "surprise," as the "general trajectory'" of social-democratic parties is toward "Blairite policies." But workers, they insist, must still support the NDP because it is a party connected to the "labour movement"—i.e. the union bureaucracy.

For the IS, the NDP's anti-working class platform and actions are irrelevant. It may have pro-business policies, impose austerity and support imperialist war, but the NDP is, according to the IS, not a "bosses" party like the Liberals and Conservatives because it is supported by the unions and the unions are "worker organisations." This is doubly false. In Canada as around the world, the unions have over the past three decades renounced the defence of even the most elementary independent interests of the working class, imposing round after round of wage and job cuts, while integrating themselves ever more completely into management. Second, in line with this shift, both the unions and NDP have systematically sought to stamp out any notion, however nebulous and faint, of the working class having independent political interests.

Unifor's predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers, has for a decade-and-a-half led a large section of Ontario's unions in urging "strategic voting" at elections, i.e. a vote for the Liberals in most constituencies. Now they have been joined by Sid Ryan of the OFL with his call for of a "smart" vote on June 12. As for the NDP, it proudly proclaims its fraternity with Obama's Democrats and like "progressive" parties.

Fightback, which preposterously claims to be a "Marxist" faction within the NDP, endorsed Horwath's election as Ontario NDP leader, claiming her ascendancy was a welcome "turn to the left". Given her unremitting rightwing record, it has had to make certain tepid criticisms of Horwath, lamenting her "*unfortunate*" pandering to big business and her "*hesitation* to put forward working-class demands" (emphasis added).

Constantly on the lookout for anything within the NDP that can be dressed up in progressive attire to uphold the social democrats' authority and divert workers and youth from fighting to building a genuine socialist party, *Fightback*, has now elevated the "Gang of 34" to the exalted status of defenders of the faith. While claiming to disagree with their support for the Wynne Liberal budget and their call for the NDP to continue propping up the Liberals, *Fightback* praises their letter and declares itself "hopeful" this faction of the social democratic establishment can lead a campaign to "take back" the party for workers and youth! In the meantime, *Fightback* calls on "the leadership of the labour movement and the NDP"—i.e. those who have systematically suppressed and smothered the class struggle, including imposing the Ontario Liberals' austerity measures— to "prepare workers both politically and organizationally for the struggles ahead."

What a fraud! There is nothing in the NDP to "take back." It has never been a socialist party. From its very beginnings, it was a vehicle of the trade union bureaucracy and sections of small business and the middle class for pressuring big business and in particular the Liberal Party for reforms and for controlling the working class. Initially it employed vague socialist rhetoric to tie the working class to a nationalist reformist program predicated on subservience to the capitalist rule, while ruthlessly fighting to stamp out the influence of revolutionary Marxism.

In the 1980s, in response to the bourgeoisie's definitive renunciation of the policy of social reform it had pursued in the years of rapid economic expansion that followed World War II, the NDP abandoned even its traditional reform program. The Ontario NDP government of the early 1990s made massive social-spending cuts, imposed wage cuts on public sector workers, and initiated workfare.

In Australia, New Zealand, Britain, France, Germany, Greece, Spain and the other countries where social-democratic parties have held national office during the past quarter century, they have served as the spearheads of ruling class offensives against the working class, often imposing wage-cutting "social contracts," social spending cuts, and privatization plans more sweeping than those implemented by the traditional right-wing parties.

There is no doubt that Horwath seeks to move the NDP still further to the right. But the trajectory she is following is that uniformly pursued by social-democratic parties around the world and which was championed in Canada by none other than the party's "sainted" late federal leader, Jack Layton.

To defeat the program of austerity and imperialist war pursued by all the parties of big business, the NDP included, workers need a new party of struggle committed to the fight for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of economic life.

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