

The political fraud of the Canadian Peoples' Social Forum

Carl Bronski
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Thousands of people are preparing to travel to Ottawa this week to attend a pan-Canadian Peoples' Social Forum (PSF) that is billed "as a space for social movements to meet and converge, for the free expression of alternative ideas and grassroots exchanges and for artistic reflections on a diversity of demands and aspirations."

According to PSF campaign material, those demands revolve around opposition to "neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies in Canada based on the guiding principles of social justice, Original Peoples' rights, sustainable development, international solidarity and participatory democracy." One of the main slogans for the gathering is "Fighting Harper and Beyond."

The Forum is a political fraud. It is aimed not at fighting for the independent political mobilization of the working class, but rather at its subordination to the ostensible "left" wing of the bourgeois political establishment. In the name of fighting Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government and the "neo-liberal" agenda, the trade unions, with the middle class left and pseudo-Marxist organizations in tow, are seeking to harness the growing opposition of the working class to the offensive of the ruling elite behind a campaign to defeat the Conservatives at the polls in 2015 and install a "progressive" government. That would mean a Liberal or New Democratic Party (NDP) government, or more likely a Liberal-NDP coalition.

A model for the political operation being prepared by these so-called progressive forces was provided by their near-unanimous support in December 2008 for a would-be Liberal-NDP coalition government committed to a continuation of Canada's neocolonial war in Afghanistan and further massive tax cuts benefiting the wealthy. More recently, in this year's Ontario election, under the pretext of preventing a Conservative victory, the unions and their middle-class hangers-on lined up behind the right-wing Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne, which after its reelection announced an escalation of its policy of draconian social spending cuts and brutal attacks on workers' rights.

This is no aberration. Since the 1980s, the unions have been engaged in negotiating the lowering of wages and benefits, the elimination of jobs, the curtailment of pensions, and the intensification of the exploitation of their members. A generation of workers has spent its entire work-life without experiencing a strike—or only losing strikes.

The unions have bowed with barely a peep to Harper's strikebreaking legislation in a series of national disputes at Air Canada, Canadian Pacific Railways, and Canada Post. When the massive 2012 Quebec student strike threatened to provoke an eruption of working class opposition to the austerity agenda of big business, the unions moved to shut it down. The Quebec Federation of Labour wrote to the Canadian Labour Congress demanding that they provide no support to the students and the CLC gladly obliged.

Beginning in the latter half of the 1990s, when the Chretien-Martin Liberal government was implementing the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, many unions adopted a policy of "strategic voting" in national and provincial elections, i.e., a vote for the Liberals in most constituencies. Those still plumping for the New Democratic Party have supported the social democrats as they have lurched ever further to the right, imposing austerity wherever they hold office, electing a former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister (Tom Mulcair) as national leader, and emerging as enthusiastic cheerleaders for Canada's participation in imperialist interventions and wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Haiti and Libya.

So much for "fighting" the policies of the ruling class.

The PSF event is one of the many off-shoots of the World Social Forum, founded in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 and dedicated to championing "counter-hegemonic globalization." Opposing "neo-liberalism" but not capitalism, the Forum promotes the illusion that the ruling class can be pressured into returning to Keynesian policies and that the nation-state can be a progressive constraint on rapacious global capital.

The real issue, however, is that capitalism has broken down under the weight of the same contradictions that led in

the first half of the last century to two world wars, the Great Depression, and the horrors of fascism. The great progressive potential of a globally integrated economy runs up against its domination by private corporations and the capitalist nation-state system. Only the abolition of this outmoded system by the united political struggle of the international working class can open the way for a harmonious development of the world economy to meet social needs, not the profit interests of a few.

The annual Social Forum meetings have, over the years, received the backing of a whole host of bourgeois governments, union bureaucracies and capitalist foundations including support from former right-wing French President Jacques Chirac, successive pro-austerity governments in Brazil, the European Union, the American AFL-CIO, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

The four-day gathering in Ottawa is chiefly sponsored by trade unions and trade union federations from across the country. Other sponsors include aboriginal, feminist and non-governmental organizations, the Council of Canadians, and the Desjardins *Caisses populaires*, Canada's sixth largest financial institution.

The organization of a Canadian PSF was initiated by *Alternatives*, a Montreal based non-governmental organization. Unfortunately, the "alternatives" that animate the organizers and sponsors of the event are squarely lodged within the existing capitalist socio-economic system. This is only underscored by the fact that they immediately sought the patronage of the pro-capitalist trade union apparatus.

There will, no doubt, be many in attendance who agree—and many who do not—that a radical, systemic change is needed in the face of the proliferation of imperialist war, social misery, authoritarianism, and ecological catastrophe. But those genuinely seeking a way out of the world capitalist crisis will be sorely disappointed by the thin political gruel on offer at the gathering.

The Forum begins on August 21 with a rally addressed by the neo-Keynesian and "anti-globalization" activist Naomi Klein, and a march to Parliament Hill. That the rally and march are scheduled for a Thursday afternoon when most workers are unable to attend speaks volumes about the social forces the organizers are most interested in attracting. Indeed, it is expected that the largest contingents will come from officials from the trade union bureaucracy and the non-governmental organizations.

Over the ensuing weekend there will be almost 500 workshops. Aside from anarchist-minded groups promoting petty-production and portraying science and technology as the problem, and the seemingly obligatory sessions aimed at self-absorbed elements of the middle class—"Alternate Cures Rejuvenation Healing and Tibetan Monk Exercises," "Urban

Gardening," or "Veganism, Anti-Colonialism and Animal Liberation"—the workshop line-up is peppered with sessions overseen by the various purveyors of identity politics intent on dividing the working class on the basis of race, gender or sexual orientation.

Thus, the Niagara Queer People of Colour will advise attendees on their particularly specific perspective, an anti-racist group will discuss Caucasian "Fear of a Black Planet" and a number of sessions on the oppression of aboriginal peoples will seek to determine the extent of "settler" (a term referring to both the entire past and current non-Aboriginal population of Canada) "responsibility" for the genocidal policies of the ruling class. What is rejected outright in all these approaches is the central understanding that the principal "oppressed community" in Canada (and around the world) is the working class—black, white, native, gay, straight, male or female—and that only this class has the social power to break the stranglehold of big business over socio-economic life and to radically reorganize society in the interests of the majority.

The turn by those who want to fight the existing system has to be toward an international socialist program and the great challenge of assembling and educating a revolutionary movement with deep roots in the global working class. This is not a project to be undertaken lightly, but outside of that perspective there is no way to address the social disaster and danger of world war and ever-increasing global misery produced by the present system.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* are fighting to overcome the crisis of working-class leadership and build a movement that will politically prepare and lead the working class in fighting for a workers' government and socialism.



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