

Canada's NDP makes left feint in bid to stanch electoral reversals

Carl Bronski
26 September 2014

Both the federal and Ontario provincial units of the trade union-supported New Democratic Party have recently made “left-sounding” policy pronouncements in an attempt to staunch a precipitous decline in popular support.

At a federal party caucus in Edmonton where corridor discussion of the likelihood that the NDP will be relegated to third-place in the 2015 election was rife, national party leader Thomas Mulcair announced that Canada's social democrats now advocate a \$15 per hour minimum wage for federally-regulated workers.

Mulcair has previously pledged that an NDP government will keep corporate taxes lower than in the US, not raise the personal income taxes of the rich by a single penny, and provide “fiscally responsible,” i.e. austerity, government. But the unions and many of their allies were quick to laud the minimum wage announcement as proof of the NDP's “progressive” colours.

What a cynical fraud! The minimum wage proposal would result in a wage increase for less than 1 percent of wage earners in Canada and possibly as few as 40,000 workers in all. Moreover, it would still leave them with an annual salary below the poverty line. Last but not least, it would be phased in over five years, meaning the earliest a \$15 federal minimum wage would come into effect is in 2019.

Whilst touting this meager, miserly proposal, Mulcair felt it circumspect not to mention that in 1996, when the then Liberal government abolished the federal minimum wage law, the NDP supported the move.

Even *Toronto Star* columnist Thomas Walkom, who has close ties to liberal-social democratic circles, pointed to the hollow character of Mulcair's “war on poverty.” “Mulcair's NDP,” wrote Walkom, “must show that it is still fighting the good fight” to mobilize the party's traditional left-wing supporters. However, “to attract enough centre-right voters to form government”—i.e. appeal to the corporate media and the ruling class as a whole—“... it must keep this fight carefully contained. Calling for a \$15 federal minimum wage speaks to both needs. It confirms the party's left-leaning credentials. But it does so in an area that, on its own,

doesn't much matter.”

In recent days, Mulcair has further tried to burnish the NDP's tattered “left” credentials, this time on the foreign policy front.

Stung by criticism that the NDP has offered no opposition to the pro-war policies of the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Mulcair has made a show of “opposing” Harper's deployment of 69 Canadian Special Forces soldiers to Iraq as part of Obama's new Mideast war.

This opposition, however, is not rooted in any principled disagreement with another imperialist war in the Middle East.

Indeed, the NDP's Foreign Affairs critic Paul Dewar travelled to Iraq with Foreign Minister John Baird and Liberal foreign affairs critic Marc Garneau earlier this month to demonstrate cross-party support for the US effort to prop up the pro-US stooge government in Baghdad.

While Mulcair has demagogically proclaimed “No to Harper's war,” the NDP has done nothing to expose the Conservative government-corporate media lie that the US's new Mideast war is motivated by humanitarian concerns over the actions of ISIS. Nor has the NDP sought to show Canadians that ISIS is itself a product of the illegal 2003 US invasion of Iraq and Washington's campaigns for “regime change” first in Libya and now Syria.

The NDP's objection to the deployment of Canadian troops to Iraq, such as it is, is entirely procedural—that Harper hasn't called a House of Commons vote to authorize it and has clearly misled the Canadian people by claiming that his government is planning for Canada's military intervention in Iraq to last only 30 days.

Workers aware of the NDP's abysmal record as a party that claims to promote peace but has invariably lent support to Canada's participation in US-led imperialist wars will not be fooled by its pose of opposition to the current Canadian deployment to Iraq.

Mulcair's stance on the new Mideast War is a transparent attempt to dent criticism of the NDP's full-throated support for the recent Israeli assault on the Palestinian people of

Gaza. So brazen was the NDP's defence of Israeli war crimes, it won accolades from the neo-conservative, rabidly pro-Zionist *National Post*. "The current round of hostilities in Gaza suggests a New Democratic Party that has matured," declared *Post* columnist John Ivison.

The NDP's position on Palestine is of a piece with its pro-imperialist policy in every corner of the globe. Canada's social democrats backed NATO's 1999 war on Serbia and the Canadian Armed Forces' leading role in the 2011 NATO "regime change" war in Libya. It supported Canada's counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan for many years, backing the attempt of US imperialism, along with its NATO allies, to take control of a strategically-located country in the resource-rich region of Central Asia. Only after antiwar sentiment became widespread did the NDP issue a call for a gradual and orderly withdrawal of Canadian troops. But in 2008, as part of its aborted coalition deal with the Liberals, the NDP announced it would serve as the junior partner in a Liberal-led government committed to waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

The leader of the Ontario NDP, Andrea Horwath, has also made a meek left feint in recent days in an attempt to arrest a decline in popular support and mounting disaffection in party ranks.

In last June's provincial election, the NDP lost seats in the Toronto area, while the Liberals regained a majority in the legislature after two years of heading a minority government.

The NDP campaign for the June Ontario election was characterized, even by wide sections of the corporate media, as being to the right of that of the Liberals.

Prior to the election, Horwath held private meetings with representatives of the Bay Street banks and investment houses and leading manufacturers, and promised them, reported the *Globe and Mail*, that the NDP 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 echoed the right-wing 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 claimed, would 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 on the backs of the working class.

Chastened by her party's latest electoral failure, Horwath offered an apology to the party faithful at an early September meeting of the NDP's provincial council. "We need to do a better job than what we did in this campaign to

articulate and to advance our basic principles and fundamental goals," she intoned. The party could make hay speaking up against the Liberal's austerity budget, she claimed, without mentioning that the NDP had supported two previous Liberal austerity budgets in the legislature and had itself vowed to implement sweeping cuts.

Horwath also announced that she had replaced longtime chief of staff Gissel Yanez with Michael Balagus, an appointment that underscored her and the NDP's steadfast commitment to a pro-business agenda. Balagus was the former principal advisor to the right-wing NDP governments of Gary Doer and his political heir, Greg Selinger, in Manitoba. Doer, a subsequent Harper appointee to the ambassadorship in Washington and darling of big agribusiness, famously declared during his three terms as provincial premier that he was really just a "small L liberal."

Horwath has announced that her party will mount a campaign to oppose the privatization of public assets. Earlier this month, the Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne put forward a plan to sell off prime Toronto real estate owned by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario. The LCBO is one of the government's most profitable assets.

In a bombastic speech announcing the anti-privatization campaign, Horwath omitted one key piece of information. In the run-up to last June's provincial election, Warren Thomas, the leader of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and a leading supporter of Horwath, secretly told Wynne that should she pursue a sale of the LCBO, his union's pension plan and a "private sector partner" would be very interested in purchasing it.



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