Canada’s NDP promotes Remembrance Day as celebration of militarism

Roger Jordan
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Canada’s trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) is campaigning for Remembrance Day, marked annually on November 11th, to be made a national holiday and has presented a bill in parliament to give that effect.

Drafted by Toronto NDP MP Dan Harris, Bill C-597 passed “second reading” in Canada’s lower house of parliament last week. It is now being sent to a House of Commons committee for discussion and possible amendment prior to a final vote likely in the new year.

Although November 11th is recognized in Canada as a public holiday for federal workers, and is a statutory holiday in several provinces and territories, this is not the case in the two most populous provinces, Quebec and Ontario. Bill C-597 would recognize the day as a statutory holiday across the country, although provincial authorities would still have to pass their own legislation to enforce it.

While it would usually be a welcome development for most workers to obtain an additional paid holiday, this is not what is motivating the NDP. As Harris made clear in comments to the media, his proposal is aimed at “starting a conversation about elevating the importance of Remembrance Day and its status”—in other words, in making it into an even bigger vehicle for the promotion of militarism and nationalism.

The right-wing Conservative government has endorsed the NDP proposal, as have the Liberals and Green Party. In last week’s vote, only two MPs opposed the bill.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has made a point of cutting short a five-day visit to China, where he should have been attending the APEC (Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit this week so that he can be in Ottawa to take center stage at tomorrow’s Remembrance Day ceremonies.

Harper, backed by the media, has claimed that this year’s Remembrance Day commemoration has taken on added significance because of the recent killings of two Canadian Armed Forces’ personnel, one in in Ottawa and the other in St Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec.

Although its Remembrance Day initiative predates these events, the NDP’s campaign plays directly into the Conservative government’s attempt to use them to boost the military, whip up a climate of fear, and legitimize, thereby, Canada’s participation in the new US-led war in the Middle East and attacks on democratic rights at home.

This was expressed most explicitly by Harper, who, speaking at a military funeral for Nathan Cirillo, the soldier shot to death last month at the National War Memorial in Ottawa, lauded the military as the incarnation of the nation and the foremost protector of democratic rights. In a carefully worded passage in his speech, Harper declared, “freedom is never free. It has been earned by the soldier and then donated to all of us.”

The justifiable desire existing among working people to reflect upon and remember the victims of the imperialist world wars of the 20th century, not to mention more recent conflicts, stands in stark contrast to the reactionary goals and traditions of Remembrance Day—a commemoration initiated and perpetuated by the political elite and military top brass as a means of promoting militarism and patriotic flag-waving and justifying Canada’s imperialist foreign policy.

As is the case in the other Commonwealth countries where the day is marked, in Canada the roots of the commemoration go back to the country’s participation in World War I on the side of the British Empire. That conflict, which saw all the major imperialist powers take to the battlefields to secure their own geopolitical and economic interests, cost the lives of over 60,000 Canadians out of a population at the time of just 7.8 million.

Marking the one hundredth anniversary of the war’s outbreak this year, Harper sought to claim that notwithstanding the horrendous death toll, World War I had helped forge Canada as a modern nation.

The reality is that the war served as the means for the Canadian bourgeoisie to ruthlessly pursue its interests against its rivals and at the expense of working people. Indeed, Harper, giving voice to the predatory ambitions of the Canadian elite than as now, hailed the fact that as a result of the war Canada had secured a “seat at the table” of the great powers, i.e. a say in, and a share, of the “victors” post-war re-division of the world.

Remembrance Day—which pointedly commemorates only the Canadian war-dead and those of their allies—whitewashes and glorifies this militarist and imperialist tradition.

The red poppy, used as a symbol to remember the dead, was inspired by the poem *In Flanders Fields*, written in 1915 by

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Canadian army officer John McCrae. It is an explicitly pro-war work, which culminates in a rousing call to arms and demands that Canadians "take up our quarrel with the foe."

It was quickly put to use as war propaganda, most notoriously in the federal election of December 1917, when the Conservative government of Robert Borden waged a chauvinist and militarist campaign with the support of sections of the Liberal Party to force through conscription in the face of broad opposition among workers and small farmers across Canada. Pro-government election propaganda sought to paint the opposition to conscription as the work of a disloyal French-Canadian minority.

In a cynical manoeuvre, the government extended the franchise for the first time ever to women—but only some women, those who were the mothers, wives or sisters of soldiers serving overseas, in the belief that they would rally round the government and conscription.

In another act of electoral manipulation, the government determined that the votes of serving soldiers could be counted in any electoral riding, meaning that their votes could be used to shore up government support in areas where it was unpopular.

"In Flanders Fields" has continued to feature prominently in Remembrance Day commemorations, which in recent years have been used ever more openly by the ruling elite to boost support for Canada's participation in aggressive military conflicts around the world.

The Harper government, in particular, has seized on the commemoration as a means of promoting a more bellicose, explicitly rightwing Canadian nationalism and done so even as its slashes medical and other benefits for veterans.

The NDP is not only joining with Harper in celebrating the military. It has seconded the Conservative government's efforts to expand Remembrance Day to include Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) "veterans" as well.

The RCMP traces its roots backed to the North-West Mounted Police, which was used to suppress the aboriginal and Metis populations in western Canada in the latter decades of the 19th century, as Canadian capitalism expanded its domination across the whole country. In the 20th century, it functioned as a political police force, infiltrating radical groups, including the Communist Party, unions and the social-democratic CCF. So-called special constables worked for the force in the 1930s as strike-breakers, at a time when it was formally aligned with a paramilitary organization, the Legion of Frontiersmen.

Today, the RCMP is a key component of the national-security apparatus that has been built up in the name of fighting terrorism. In hailing this institution, the NDP is giving further grist for the mill of the most reactionary elements who are pushing for a further expansion of the powers at the disposal of the police and intelligence services.

The NDP is not just calling for Canada's role in past military conflicts to be honoured, but also its increasing involvement in the wars of the 21st century. The online petition it encouraged members and supporters to sign in the run-up to last week's vote on Bill C-597 declares, "We now have a new generation of veterans whose contributions also deserve to be commemorated."

The NDP's Remembrance Day proposal is merely the latest episode in a sharp rightward turn by Canada's social democrats extending back decades. Beginning with NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, the NDP has supported Canada's participation in a series of US-led wars. The party fully backed Canada's role in the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and Canada's subsequent assumption of a leading role in a neo-colonial counter-insurgency war in Kandahar. In late 2006, the NDP claimed to favor the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan, but when it entered into an abortive coalition deal with the Liberals in 2008 it agreed to serve in a government that would wage in Afghanistan through 2011.

The NDP voted in favour of Canada's leading role in the 2011 NATO onslaught on Libya, which wrought devastation on the population and produced a proliferation of Islamist parties and militias.

The NDP's current pose of opposition to the air campaign in Iraq does not represent a deviation from this rightward course. NDP leader Thomas Mulcair, who spent much of the summer defending the Israeli assault on Gaza, has called for weapons to be supplied by Canadian planes to the Kurds and Iraqi government, and for a "humanitarian" mission to be undertaken by Ottawa in the region in conjunction with Washington and its allies.

This record makes clear that the NDP's Remembrance Day proposal is not merely aimed at glorifying the military's past accomplishments. It is part of a concerted effort by the ruling class to whip up nationalism and militarism so as to intimidate the public into accepting Canada's participation in future wars.

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