

Ontario NDP riven by dissension and recriminations

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Andrea Horwath survived a mandatory leadership review at last month's Ontario New Democratic Party (NDP) convention, winning the support of 77 percent of convention delegates.

The vote guarantees that Horwath will remain at the helm of the trade union-supported NDP, the third-place party in Canada's most populous province, for at least another two years.

The leadership review took place in the aftermath of the drubbing the party suffered in last June's provincial election. The NDP won the same number of seats as it had held in the previous parliament (21). But it lost seats in Toronto and—what was especially prized by the union bureaucracy and social democratic politicians—political influence, as the governing Liberals won back the parliamentary majority they had lost in the October 2011 election.

By all accounts, the mood at the convention was one of tension and discontent. Due to a motion from the floor, the leadership review vote was delayed by several hours, thus preventing a vote immediately after Horwath had given what was meant to be a rousing speech. Many of the delegates stayed silent and rooted to their seats when Horwath's victory was announced despite frantic attempts on the part of her aides to mount a standing ovation and a prolonged victory chant.

Nevertheless, the strong leadership mandate given Horwath speaks to the fundamental agreement within the party to continue pursuing its aim of supplanting the Liberals as Canadian big business's "left" party of government. In fact, Horwath received a slightly higher approval rate than she did in the last leadership review conducted in 2012.

During her introductory address, Horwath spouted some vaguely left-sounding platitudes about "reaffirming ... the great project of social democracy," while making clear that one of her first priorities is to continue to "reach out to the business community." She also slipped in a few throwaway remarks about a "living wage," climate change, and affordable daycare.

Underscoring Horwath's commitment to a right-wing pro-

business agenda was her appointment of Michael Balagus as her new chief of staff in early September. Balagus was the former principal advisor to the right-wing NDP governments of Gary Doer and his successor, Greg Selinger, in Manitoba.

While the NDP has been bitterly divided over the past half year, with much of the union bureaucracy and a coterie of middle class activists harshly criticizing Horwath, this spat has been merely of a tactical nature over what right-wing course to follow.

Indeed, prior to Horwath's decision last May to withdraw the NDP's support for the minority Liberals, many of the union bosses were singing her praises. They were quite happy to see the NDP sustaining in office a Liberal government that had imposed sweeping social spending cuts, a two-year public sector wage freeze, and the criminalization of all teacher job action against government-imposed concessionary contracts.

Horwath and the union bureaucracy justified the NDP-Liberal partnership by claiming it was the only means of blocking the coming to power of a hard-right Progressive Conservative government pledged to implement anti-worker, US-style "right-to-work" laws. In fact, Tory leader Tim Hudak retreated from this position at the beginning of this year, bowing to pressure from prominent business leaders, like the heads of the Detroit Three automakers, who view the unions as valuable partners in suppressing working class militancy.

When Premier Kathleen Wynne and her Liberals tabled their 2014-2015 budget in May, it was expected to be an open-and-shut case. The NDP, reprising its role in the previous two springs, would provide the parliamentary votes necessary to pass the budget.

The province's most powerful union bosses, including Jerry Dias of UNIFOR, the country's largest private-sector union, and Sid Ryan, head of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), fell over themselves in praise of Wynne's budget, which they trumpeted as the most "progressive" in years. UNIFOR released a statement in which Dias urged the NDP to "work with the Liberals to pass the budget".

Their assertions that the Liberal budget was “progressive” were a bald-faced lie—one that underscores their role in imposing austerity on the working class. The budget pledged a public spending freeze for three years beginning in 2015, amounting to a real spending cut of ten percent by 2018. This was on top of a 2012 budget that made the deepest public spending cuts in the province's history, dwarfing even those made by the Conservatives under Mike Harris in the late 1990s.

However, Horwath, to the union bureaucrats' dismay, balked at backing the Liberals yet again. This was not because she had any serious disagreement with the Liberals' austerity agenda. In the weeks prior to the tabling of the budget, she had been meeting with corporate bosses to assure them that the NDP was committed to balancing the budget on the backs of working people and ready to take on public sector workers to do so. Her fear was that the NDP's continuing support for the Liberals would undermine the social democrats' electoral support.

To howls of protest from the union officialdom, she announced in early May that the NDP would vote against the budget, an act which made an election inevitable.

Dias lashed out at Horwath, admonishing her for turning down a “win-win” situation. Dias' warnings that UNIFOR would have to “start to second guess” their relationship to the NDP were quickly echoed in union boardrooms across the province.

Dias' comments were followed in late May by an open letter to Horwath written by 34 prominent social democrats and community activists, who were infuriated that she had defeated “the most progressive budget in recent Ontario history.”

They further vented their spleen against Horwath's platform, which mimicked some of the populist pronouncements of then Toronto Mayor Rob Ford. Horwath proposed the creation of a “Spending Minister” to ferret out “waste” in government spending, and joined the Liberals in pledging to eliminate the \$12.5 billion annual provincial budget deficit by 2017.

During the election campaign, the unions and much of the pseudo-left trotted out the tactic of “strategic voting,” encouraging workers to vote for the Liberal or NDP candidate best poised to defeat the Conservatives. This constituted an implicit call for the re-election of a Liberal government; once their wishes materialized, these organizations openly celebrated the election of a Liberal majority government as a “vital success.”

This is the background to the recent dissension within and around the NDP.

The NDP's backers in the union bureaucracy, comprised of well-paid executives utterly hostile to the struggle of the

working class to defend its jobs and rights, saw a continued Liberal-NDP partnership as the most effective means of advancing their own corporatist interests, while smothering working class opposition.

In a similar fashion, much of the middle class core of NDP “activists”—a layer drawn from community and identity-politics activists, professionals and small proprietors, and typified by the “group of 34”—were strongly supportive of the NDP propping up a big-business Liberal government that sought to mask its right-wing agenda with all sorts of phony “progressive” poses and gestures, beginning with Wynne's own grandstanding as Canada's “first lesbian premier.”

Like the union bureaucrats, the middle class activists are upset that Horwath “squandered” their gateway to the corridors of powers. Insofar as they have criticized Horwath's June election platform for being right-wing, it has only been to provide themselves with a semblance of political cover for their own endorsement of the Liberals' anti-working class austerity measures.

The unions continue to pursue close relations with Wynne and her government. She was a keynote speaker at the recent Unifor-sponsored “Good Jobs summit.”

At the same time, the union bureaucrats recognize that the Liberals' austerity measures will meet growing working-class resistance. That is why they are supporting Horwath in her cynical and utterly unconvincing efforts to return the NDP to its “social-democratic roots.” In the event of a mass upsurge against the Liberals' attacks, the unions want to be able, as they have so often done in the past, to invoke the future election of an ostensibly “pro-worker” NDP government to justify their suppression of the class struggle.



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