

Canada's International Socialists promote unions' "anti-Harper," pro-Liberal campaign

Dylan Lubao, Keith Jones
13 December 2014

The pseudo-left International Socialists (IS) are lining up behind the trade unions' campaign to "stop" Canada's ruling Conservatives by electing a "progressive" government—that is, a Liberal or a Liberal-New Democratic Party (NDP) coalition government.

By so doing, the IS, the Canadian co-thinkers of the US-based International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the British Socialist Workers Party, have once again revealed themselves to be little more than an extension of the trade union bureaucracy. As such, they are entirely complicit in the unions' systematic suppression of working-class opposition to the big-business assault on jobs, wages and public services.

The unions kicked off their campaign to defeat Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservatives in the 2015 federal election at last August's Canadian Peoples' Social Forum in Ottawa. This event, sponsored by the unions, the nationalist Council of Canadians, and numerous other ostensibly left groups, was enthusiastically promoted by the IS. The forum closed with the adoption of an official statement promising "a combative campaign against the Conservatives" in 2015.

In the months since, the unions have begun prepping their election war rooms. The country's national trade union federation, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), "will take the lead on the overall campaign," according to Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) President Sid Ryan. The country's largest industrial union, Unifor, has, for its part, vowed to make a Conservative electoral defeat its central goal in 2015. Highlighting Unifor's eagerness to join hands with the Liberals—who when they last formed Canada's national government carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, led the country into two wars, and initiated a massive rearmament campaign—Unifor President Jerry Dias declared, "If my choice is Stephen Harper or (Liberal leader) Justin Trudeau, then that's a no-brainer."

The unions' campaign to defeat Harper at the polls in 2015 is modeled on their "successful" campaign to "Stop Hudak," that is, to prevent the coming to power of a Tim Hudak-led Progressive Conservative government in Ontario.

In the name of stopping Hudak, the unions and their NDP allies propped up a minority Liberal government for more than two-and-a-half years as it imposed massive budget cuts, slashed the real wages of a million public sector workers, and criminalized teacher job actions.

Then this spring, the OFL and the Working Families Coalition, a union-sponsored election lobby group, went into overdrive to campaign for a "smart" or "strategic" anti-Conservative vote in the June 12 provincial election, thereby helping Kathleen Wynne and her big-business Liberals win re-election, this time with a parliamentary majority.

Like the unions, the IS has celebrated Hudak's electoral defeat, calling it a "vital success" for the working class. "The real story of the 2014 (Ontario) election is the sound defeat of Tim Hudak and his hard line platform of attacks on workers, unions and the public services," gushed Pam Johnson in the postelection analysis the IS published in its monthly *Socialist Worker*. She went on to laud the unions for having "carried a

clear and unified Stop Hudak message." "This broad level of solidarity...was key to Hudak's defeat."

These statements echo almost word for word the triumphalist claims of the union officialdom. For example, the OFL's Ryan, in a *Rabble* website article he titled "This labour campaign stopped Tim Hudak. Next is Stephen Harper," declared that the unions' "unprecedented" coming "together" to defeat Hudak was "one of the most important stories" of the election.

What all these statements intentionally obscure is that the unions have been and are working hand-in-hand with a Liberal government committed, no less than Hudak and his Conservatives, to making the working class pay for the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression.

If there was such a thing as a "real story" of the 2014 Ontario election, it was the political disenfranchisement and suppression of the working class. The entire establishment—from the Conservatives through the social-democratic NDP, the unions and the pseudo-left groups like the IS—came forward to insist that workers had to choose between rival right-wing austerity programs. While Hudak pledged to eliminate 100,000 government jobs and the Liberals ran on their anti-worker record of spending cuts, privatization, and massive tax cuts for big business and high-income earners, the NDP touted itself as the party best able to eliminate government "waste" and balance the budget. Indeed, in the weeks prior to the calling of the election, Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath met privately with some of the province's most important business leaders to assure them of the NDP's commitment to meeting the Liberals' target of eliminating Ontario's \$12 billion annual deficit by 2017 and her party's readiness to "take on" public sector workers to do so.

Even as the unions and IS were chortling in late June over the reputed "success" of the "anti-Hudak" campaign, workers and young people were confronting an intensified Liberal austerity drive as the Liberals pushed through the legislature a budget committing Ontario to three years of sharply escalating social spending cuts—cuts that will slash per capita spending by more than 15 percent by 2018.

Like the OFL, CLC and Unifor, the IS continues to promote the anti-Hudak campaign as a model to be emulated. An article titled "Assessing labour's fight against austerity," published by *Socialist Worker* for Labour Day, laments numerous union retreats, but then declares in its concluding paragraph, "2014 has shown that's it possible to mobilise, as the OFL anti-Hudak campaign showed, against austerity and the Tories."

IS member Evan Johnston, in an October article, "CUPE Ontario prepares to take on Kathleen Wynne," that seeks to promote illusions in the readiness of Canada's largest public sector union to mount a struggle against a government it just helped bring to power, lauds the "impressive few months of mobilizing" that Ontario's unions carried out "in the lead-up to the provincial election."

In their initial post-election article, but not in its subsequent commentary, the IS conceded that there was an unfortunate "downside" to

the unions' anti-Hudak campaign.

After heaping praise on the unions' anti-Hudak Workers' Rights Campaign and asserting that the "effectiveness and solidarity across the labour movement as a whole was duly noted by the media and the defeated PCs," *Socialist Worker* declares, "The downside was support for 'strategic voting' for the Liberals to ensure Hudak's defeat. Sadly, (ONDP leader) Horwath...did not relate to the anger against austerity."

This is nothing more than a transparent attempt to cover up their and the unions' role in politically tying the working class to a vicious, right-wing Liberal government.

The unions' anti-Hudak campaign and their support for the Liberals were from the outset inseparable. They were two expressions of the same policy—a right-wing policy the union bureaucracy in Canada, as around the world, has been pursuing for the past three decades in response to the collapse of the post-Second World War boom and globalization, shifts that pulled the rug out from under their national-reformist orientation. This policy consists of seeking to uphold the privileges of the union bureaucracy by integrating the unions ever more completely into corporate management and collaborating ever more directly in the big-business assault on the working class.

Since the late 1990s, that is, since the Ontario unions shut down the mass movement that erupted against the Harris Conservatives' Reagan-style "Common Sense Revolution" because they feared it could escape their control and become a genuine mass challenge to the domination of big business, the unions in Ontario have either been in a tacit alliance with the Liberals or, as in the case of the Canadian Auto Workers (now Unifor) and the other members of the Working Families' Coalition, in an explicit alliance with them.

After the Liberals, who had returned to power in 2003, lost their parliamentary majority in the October 2011 election, the NDP, at the unions' urging, entered into a de facto coalition with the Liberals, ensuring the passage of their 2012 and 2013 austerity budgets.

All this was justified in the name of preventing the "right," i.e. the Conservatives, from retuning to power.

The unions' decision to launch their anti-Hudak Workers' Rights Campaign came in response to his 2013 announcement that a Progressive Conservative government would enact a US-style "Right-to-Work" law to impede union organization, facilitate union busting, and abolish automatic dues check-off (the Rand formula).

To be sure, Hudak's right-to-work proposal threatened workers' basic rights. But the unions never opposed it from the standpoint of defending workers' right to fight for their interests against the employers and develop a working-class counteroffensive against big business and its political representatives.

The unions' opposition was motivated by the bureaucracy's concern at the threat Hudak's proposals, especially the elimination of automatic dues check-off, represented to its income and corporatist privileges.

Their response was to step up their efforts to convince the ruling class that unions and the state-designed and regulated collective bargaining system play a pivotal role in containing and policing worker discontent.

This found concrete expression in the unions' close partnership with the Liberals, under McGuinty and later Wynne, in implementing their austerity measures. The unions imposed the Liberals' two-year wage freeze, isolated the teachers when they rebelled, and then forced them to submit to the Liberals' strikebreaking legislation. All the while, they sought to intimidate militant workers who challenged their smothering of the class struggle by invoking the danger of an even more avowedly right-wing Conservative government.

In the end, Hudak dropped his "right-to-work proposal" because, as he frankly explained, broad section sections of big business urged him to. Many of Ontario's largest employers, including the auto makers, opposed Hudak's assault on the unions because they, like Wynne, consider them

valuable partners in forcing through contract concessions and job losses.

Hailed by the IS as a stirring mobilization worthy of emulation, the anti-Hudak campaign was a political fraud. Through it the union bureaucracy maneuvered to defend its interests at the expense of the working class and above all suppressed the class struggle, thereby enabling the ruling class to press forward with the implementation of its austerity agenda.

As for the IS's promotion of the NDP as a "working-class political alternative" to the Liberals, it amounts to no more than a minor tactical difference with the dominant wing of the trade union bureaucracy.

Like the unions, the NDP long ago shredded even its milquetoast reformist program and, in keeping with the evolution of social-democratic parties all over the world, has over the past three decades acted as a pliant instrument of big business, implementing capitalist austerity and supporting an ever-more aggressive Canadian foreign policy.

In late 2008 the federal NDP entered into an agreement with the Liberals to replace the Harper Conservatives with a Liberal-led coalition government committed to fiscal responsibility, enacting a \$50 billion Liberal-Conservative corporate tax cut plan, and waging war in Afghanistan. The IS initially joined the unions in welcoming the coalition deal, which ultimately proved abortive, claiming that the coalition would be more susceptible to pressure from below.

The IS works hand-in-glove with the unions bureaucrats who themselves are politically aligned with and tied to the NDP and Liberal politicians, providing left phrases to obscure the role their allies and allies once-removed play in suppressing working-class resistance and imposing the diktats of big business.

Shortly after the Ontario election, the IS welcomed Judy Rebick, the founder of *Rabble* and a prominent media personality, to address a panel on the "NDP and social democracy in crisis" at its "Marxism 2014" conference. Just weeks before, Rebick had joined 33 long-time social democrats in issuing an open letter that parroted the visceral attack many union leaders mounted on the NDP for endangering their alliance with the Liberal government by forcing an election.

To cheers and applause from the IS audience she declared, "I actually think Kathleen Wynne (Canada's first openly lesbian premier) progressive on a lot of issues, especially on feminist issues and LGBT issues." Rebick then explained she went into the ballot box "intending to vote Liberal in my riding," but at the last minute voted for the Greens, another avowedly pro-capitalist party, instead.

This incident sheds light on the privileged middle-class layer of union bureaucrats and would-be union bureaucrats, academics and other well-heeled professionals and identity-politics activists who comprise the IS and whose interests it articulates.

Utterly opposed to the independent political mobilization of the working class against crisis-ridden capitalism, they are more than happy to cheer on the unions' pro-Liberal anti-Hudak campaign and to provide a political cover for their efforts to divert the mass opposition to Harper and his Conservatives behind the push for a Liberal or a Liberal-NDP government, that is, a right-wing big-business government that will continue and broaden the offensive against the working class.

A revolutionary workers' party, a Canadian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, will only be built through a relentless political struggle to expose the pseudo-left politics of the IS and like groups.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact