

Canada: Unions join Liberals, NDP in “Anybody but Conservative” campaign

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Third-party attack ads targeting the ruling Conservatives have been hitting the Canadian airwaves in recent weeks, as the federal elections scheduled for October loom on the horizon. Prominent among them are ads from Engage Canada—a newly created group, largely financed by the trade unions, and headed by leading strategists for the Liberals and the traditionally union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP).

Engage Canada has to date released ads which point to the growth of social inequality and the systematic dismantling of public health care under Prime Minister Stephen Harper, ending with the tag line “The Harper Conservatives: They won’t be there for you.”

Among the group’s leaders are important figures associated with past NDP and Liberal election campaigns, including Don Guy, a former campaign director for now-retired Ontario Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty, and Kathleen Monk, the former director of communications for late NDP leader Jack Layton. Former NDP national campaign director Brian Topp was also involved before becoming chief of staff to Alberta’s newly-minted NDP Premier, Rachel Notley.

Engage Canada is only the latest example of collaboration between the NDP and Liberals at the federal level. In 2008, the Liberals and NDP agreed to topple the then minority Conservative government and replace it with a Liberal-NDP coalition committed to “fiscal responsibility,” implementing a five-year Liberal-Conservative plan to cut corporate taxes by \$50 billion, and waging war in Afghanistan war through 2011. This union-backed plan for an alternative big business government was only scuttled by the Liberals after Harper, in what amounted to a constitutional coup, shut down parliament for seven weeks thereby preventing it from voting non-confidence in his government.

The Liberals were long the Canadian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government. During the Chretien-Martin Liberal governments of the 1990s and early 2000s, they imposed the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history. Jobless benefits, public services and transfers to the provinces that fund health care, welfare and post-secondary education were slashed, with the “savings” subsequently handed over to the rich and big business through massive tax cuts.

As opposition to the Liberals’ vicious attacks grew, they used

a variation on the same argument now being advanced by those urging working people to focus on defeating the Conservatives at the polls: namely, lesser-evilism. Repeatedly Chretien and Martin used their opponents in the Reform Party, then the Canadian Alliance and ultimately Harper’s “new” Conservative Party as right-wing foils. They would rail against the “uncaring right” during election campaigns. Then, when safely returned to power, implement key elements of the Reform-Canadian Alliance platform, including: eliminating the annual budget deficit through massive social spending cuts, slashing corporate and capital-gain taxes, rearming the Canadian Armed Forces, and adopting a new hardline against Quebec separatism, including the threat, codified in the Liberal’s “Clarity Act,” of the ethno-linguistic partition of a seceding Quebec.

The NDP’s willingness to collaborate with the Liberals and embrace the claim it is a “progressive” alternative to Harper, exposes its own right-wing, pro-big business character. Like social democratic parties the world over, the NDP has repudiated its traditional social-reformist program and now advocates pro-big business policies of austerity and war almost identical to those of the Canadian elite’s traditional governing parties.

Seven years have elapsed since the last coalition talks, but the possibility has always remained on the table. NDP leader Thomas Mulcair, himself a former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, has regularly broached the topic over the past half-year. In doing so, he has stressed that it was the NDP that first proposed the 2008 coalition and “made it a priority,” adding that his party’s “top priority” remains replacing the Harper government.

If in recent weeks Mulcair’s public enthusiasm for an anti-Harper coalition has dampened, it is only because the NDP is seeking to exploit a recent bump in its opinion poll numbers. Liberal leader Justin Trudeau has claimed there are “very big impediments” to forming a coalition. But the truth is that parties share almost identical right-wing programs. The Liberals favor a slight increase in tax rates on the rich, but oppose any corporate tax increases. The NDP favors a small hike in big business tax rates, but opposes any increase in personal income tax rates, including on the top 1 percent.

Should parliamentary arithmetic so dictate, the two parties would have no problem in joining forces, whether in a formal coalition or a more traditional minority-government arrangement.

The unions' intervention through Engage Canada is modelled closely on the "Stop Hudak" campaign they waged in the run-up to last year's Ontario provincial election, which sought to prevent Tim Hudak and his Progressive Conservatives from replacing the Liberals. The unions called for a "smart" or "strategic" vote for the NDP or Liberal candidate best poised to defeat the Conservatives—a policy which meant in practice supporting the Liberals' return to power with a parliamentary majority.

This followed a two-period period in which a minority Liberal government was propped up by the NDP. Twice the NDP ensured the passage of Liberal austerity budgets. And the social democrats continued to prop up the Liberals after they adopted legislation criminalizing teacher job-action and imposing concessionary contracts on the province's teachers by decree.

The Working Families Coalition, like Engage Canada a union creation, has played a major role in helping keeping the Liberals in power in Ontario since 2003. At each election, unions have forked out tens and even hundreds of thousands of dollars each to fund "anti-Conservative" ad campaigns.

The "threat from the right" is invoked to politically bind workers to the NDP and Liberals, although these parties are no less committed to the defence of the interests of big business than their Tory rivals.

Whenever the NDP has formed governments at the provincial level, it has come into headlong conflict with the working class, slashing vital social services and attacking worker rights. On the sole occasion the NDP formed the government in Ontario, it imposed a wage- and job-cutting "social contract" on public sector workers and initiated "workfare," helping pave the way for Mike Harris's Margaret Thatcher-inspired "Common Sense Revolution."

The reality is the three-party system has always functioned as a means of containing social discontent and shackling the working class to the parties of the ruling class.

The unions' support for the "Anyone but Harper" campaign is bound up with securing their own privileged interests, which are coming into ever more open conflict with those of the working class.

The unions have responded to the ever-widening big business offensive on wages, jobs and worker rights, by suppressing the class struggle and entering into ever closer tripartite collaboration with corporate management and government.

Representing the most reactionary sections of Canadian capital, the Conservatives resent the privileges accorded the union bureaucrats, and as part of a more general assault on worker rights, have targeted the corporate interests of the union officialdom.

Last month, the Conservatives pushed through Bill C-377, which seeks to smother the unions in paperwork, as well as embarrass the union officialdom. It forces the unions to compile detailed financial statements for public viewing, enumerating all their expenses over \$5,000 and the names and salaries of all union employees making over \$100,000 per year.

The Conservatives have also removed the special tax status of the \$9 billion Quebec Federation of Labour Solidarity Fund and other union-managed investment funds—big business enterprises run by the union bureaucracy.

Top figures in the Conservative milieu, including Hudak while he was Ontario Conservative leader, have openly pushed for the enactment of US-style right-to-work laws, which would remove workers covered by a collective agreement from the obligation of paying union dues. After decades of their betraying the rank-and-file, the union bureaucrats fear that masses of workers will simply opt out of union representation.

Hudak reversed his stance at the insistence of top Ontario corporate bosses. They recognize and appreciate the services rendered by the union brass over many decades in orchestrating significant concessions and givebacks, such as the introduction of a two-tier wage at the Big Three automakers, as well as their role in preventing or aborting every major worker struggle in recent memory.

The Liberals and NDP share the outlook of Ontario's corporate bosses. Both parties have pledged to uphold the interests of big business by cutting spending and attacking workers' rights, creating a friendly environment for the business elite, and stepping up militarist interventions abroad in the interests of Canadian imperialism. But, under conditions of a deepening economic crisis, they believe that this reactionary program can best be imposed in collaboration with the trade unions, which will serve to police and suppress the opposition within the working class that will inevitably emerge.

The union bureaucracy hopes that by helping bring to power an NDP-Liberal coalition, or potentially an NDP majority government, many in its ranks will be able to secure well-paid positions as policy advisers and that it will be able to protect the integrity of its organizations. This will be with the exclusive aim of integrating the unions even more into big business and the state so as to defend the competitiveness and world position of Canadian capitalism at the expense of the working class.



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