

Canada's pseudo-left Fightback promotes trade unions and NDP

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In its response to the recently concluded strikes at University of Toronto (UofT) and York University, Canada's pseudo-left Fightback group has sought to boost the authority of the pro-capitalist, pro-austerity trade unions, hailing the strikes' outcome as a tremendous victory.

The strikes began early in March, when around 3,600 teaching assistants and part-time instructors at York and 6,400 at UofT voted for job action to defeat their respective employers' concession demands. The CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees) trade union went to work immediately to isolate and divide the striking workers and ensure that the strikes did not become the catalyst for a broader challenge to the Ontario Liberal governments' social spending cuts.

At UofT, the union forced the strikers to go back to work following an agreement to have all outstanding contract issues determined by an arbitrator appointed by Kathleen Wynne's Liberal government. At York, CUPE officials used some modest concessions from management to broker a deal to shut down the strike. Even these extremely limited gains were achieved only because the workers resisted efforts by CUPE to impose a contract after the strike had been underway for barely a week. Nonetheless, the teaching assistants at York, as at UofT, will continue to work for poverty wages, earning well below Ontario's paltry official poverty line of \$19,000 per year.

This did not stop Fightback from enthusing over the supposed victory that had been achieved. In an article published as the workers returned to their jobs, Fightback declared, "Toronto university strikes victorious: austerity can be defeated." The workers had made "important advances at the bargaining table," the article crowed. This proved, in the words of an earlier Fightback article, that cuts and concessions could be successfully opposed through "bold and militant strike action" under CUPE's leadership.

But when it came to actually discussing the contracts' details even Fightback found itself hard-pressed to paint the strikes' outcome in glowing colours. At York, the maintenance of tuition indexation merely represented the continuation of a measure secured in 2001. And at UofT any alleged gains were dependent on the decision of the arbitrator to be appointed by the Liberal provincial government—a government that is implementing sweeping social spending cuts and has repeatedly used strikebreaking legislation to impose concessionary contracts on public sector worker.

The Fightback article pathetically claimed, "In general, we at Fightback do not support binding arbitration as it takes away the workers' right to democratically determine their final contract. Nonetheless, it should be said that the UofT administration did not want to take the road of binding arbitration, nor make any concessions. It can therefore be clearly stated that UofT workers are returning with their heads held high, having won a partial victory and made a strong show of strength."

As could be expected, when the arbitrator unveiled his final decision earlier this month, all of the UofT administration's demands were enshrined in the new contract.

Fightback's claims of a "victory" were aimed at disguising the fact that once again the trade unions had done everything in their power to shut down a struggle which had the potential to initiate a broader working-class challenge to the austerity agenda being pursued by the provincial Liberal and federal Conservative governments. CUPE's primary goal throughout was to isolate and quickly terminate the strikes, so as to prevent them from galvanizing opposition among public sector workers to the government's wage freeze (the so-called "net zero" mandate) and from students and working people as a whole to the assault on higher education and public services.

Fearing the militancy of the strikers, CUPE's national leadership took a leading role in the effort to shut down the strikes, and with the active support of the more militant-talking local leaderships, ensured the strikes were conducted as separate affairs and confined to the most narrow collective-bargaining perspective.

Fightback and the unions' support for Ontario's Liberal government

Throughout the strikes, Fightback's role was to boost CUPE's authority and cover up the fact that Ontario's unions are close political allies of the provincial Liberal government.

According to Fightback, the Liberals posturing as "progressives" in the run up to the June 2014 provincial election "unfortunately, led many trade unions to mistakenly call for a strategic vote for the Liberals."

This is thoroughly dishonest. The unions have been supporting the Liberals, who have formed Ontario's government since 2003, for years. This has included forking over millions of dollars during every election campaign since 1999 to help fund third party, pro-Liberal advertising campaigns. And the unions have continued with this loyal support over the past five years, as the Liberals have implemented massive social spending cuts, slashed public sector workers' real wages, criminalized teacher job action under Bill 115, and further reduced corporate taxes.

The unions' embrace of the big business Liberals was their calculated response to the last wave of mass working class struggle in Ontario. Between 1995 and 1997 hundreds of thousands joined mass protests and strikes in opposition to Conservative Premier Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution"—a Thatcher-inspired program of deep cuts to public services and welfare, privatization, and tax cuts skewed to further enrich the most privileged sections of society.

The union bureaucrats became increasingly apprehensive at the mounting militancy of the anti-Harris movement. First a "Day of Action" in Toronto, partially shut down the city's transit system in defiance of their wishes. Then, in the fall of 1997, the unions torpedoed a strike by teachers against regressive education reforms that was winning popular support, because, as several union leaders frankly stated, Harris had

refused to negotiate and they were not prepared to challenge his “right to rule.”

Shortly afterwards, many of Ontario’s unions formed the Ontario Working Families Coalition, the organization through which its collaboration with the Liberals was cemented.

From the outset of this year’s university strikes, Fightback saw its main task in preventing any break by workers from the reactionary union bureaucracy. Among the slogans at the end of a Fightback statement was “Keep the union united! Don’t leave CUPE 3902 to fight alone!”

While it failed to name them, Fightback’s statement was clearly aimed at the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the only organizations which intervened in the strike to provide it with a socialist perspective.

In a March 16 statement, A socialist strategy to defeat austerity and defend education, the SEP and IYSSE urged the striking teaching assistants to break out of the straightjacket imposed on the strike by the trade unions and fight for the development of a working class political struggle against the austerity policies of the provincial and federal governments. This required the building of independent strike committees in opposition to the trade unions, and a decisive turn to workers across Canada facing a similar assault on their jobs and working conditions. The privileged layers of the middle class to which pseudo-left groups like Fightback orient are utterly hostile to such a development. Hence Fightback’s explicit defence of the trade union leadership, under the guise of preserving “unity,” and firm rejection of any independent initiative by teaching assistants.

Fightback: loyal supporters of the NDP

Fightback’s position on the Toronto university typifies its political line.

Notwithstanding its socialist pretensions, Fightback holds membership in and functions as a faction of the pro-capitalist, NDP, which it claims is a “workers’ party.” The NDP tolerates Fightback within its ranks because the group provides its openly right-wing policies with some much needed left-sounding cover.

In its recently published 2015 perspectives document, Fightback wrote that the NDP’s rise to the official federal opposition in the 2011 election took place “because of its connection to the working class.” They went on to suggest that the question of whether a future NDP government would break with capitalism remains undecided!

Such claims are made at a time when social democratic parties the world over have been transformed into willing accomplices of the financial elite. Whether it is the Labour Party in Britain, the Socialist Party in France, Germany’s SPD, or Greece’s Pasok, broad masses of workers rightly view these organizations with hostility due to their leading role in imposing the dictates of the financial aristocracy, including the multi-billion bank bailouts following the 2008 economic crisis, the enforcement of austerity programs, and the launching of imperialist wars in the Middle East and elsewhere

In Britain, Fightback’s co-thinkers continue to claim that Labour, the party responsible for the UK’s involvement in the illegal invasion of Iraq, for handing hundreds of billions to the city of London, and for expanding Thatcher’s assault on the National Health Service and other public services, can be pressured into fighting for socialism.

The NDP is no less hostile to the interests of working people. An instrument of the trade union bureaucracy and other privileged middle class layers, it is completely beholden to the capitalist elite. The path for the Harris Conservative government was blazed by the NDP government which preceded it and imposed a wage and budget-cutting “social

contract” and onerous regressive tax hikes and pioneered workfare. The cuts carried out by Saskatchewan’s NDP government in the 1990s are still held up by big business spokesmen as an example for governments everywhere.

In 2008, the NDP reached agreement with the Liberals at the federal level to establish a coalition to unseat the Harper Conservative government, a development averted only by Harper’s shutting down of parliament. Under the coalition deal, the NDP committed to making “fiscal responsibility” the government’s first principle, implementing \$50 billion in corporate tax cuts, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

No less significantly, the NDP has emerged as staunch support of Canadian imperialism’s more aggressive foreign policy. Beginning with its support for the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, the NDP has backed one Canadian military intervention after another, including Canada’s participation in the Afghan counter-insurgency war, the overthrow of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004, and the NATO 2011 “regime-change” war in Libya.

Since becoming the official opposition at the 2011 election, the NDP has shifted still further to the right. It demonstrated once again its hostility to any working challenge to austerity when in 2012 it refused to even nominally support the Quebec student strike on the spurious grounds that it was a provincial matter. Even when the Quebec Liberal government imposed its draconian Bill 78, which effectively criminalized the strike and placed draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate, the NDP refused to condemn the move.

With the selection of former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair as party leader in 2012, the NDP and their union backers further underlined that their goal is to form or join a Liberal-type government that will employ vague “progressive” rhetoric while pursuing the Canadian ruling elite’s agenda of austerity and war. Mulcair has repeatedly pledged his willingness to form a coalition with the big business Liberals after the upcoming federal election in October and repeatedly proclaimed his opposition to any increase in the taxes of even the richest Canadians.

The fraudulent character of Fightback’s “left” credentials is further exposed by their explicit support for Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath, a leading representative of the party’s right-wing. Last November, when Horwath’s leadership was up for review at the party’s convention, Fightback declared that they would still back her as leader if she made a verbal commitment to a few mild reformist pledges, such as a \$15 minimum wage and additional funding for childcare.

For Fightback it was of no consequence that prior to the previous spring’s election Horwath had met secretly with top corporate executives to assure them that if the NDP formed the government it would eliminate the province’s deficit at the expense of working people. Or that under Horwath the NDP had spent much of the previous two years in a de facto coalition with the Liberals, ensuring that the minority Liberal government was able to pass two austerity budgets.

Fightback’s unreserved backing for the NDP has been no less forthright on the issue of the growth of Canadian militarism. Following the announcement by the Conservative government that Special Forces soldiers and fighter jets would be deployed in the war in Iraq against Islamic State last October, Fightback praised the NDP’s decision to vote in parliament against the move as a principled opposition to war.

Hailing NDP leader Thomas Mulcair as an effective opponent of the Harper government’s war policy, Fightback proclaimed, “the NDP, as the parliamentary voice of the Canadian labour movement, must take a firm stand against any military intervention in the Middle East, including so-called ‘non-combat’ interventions to support the war efforts of allies.”

The NDP’s vote was purely of a tactical nature. Mulcair has repeatedly proclaimed that the NDP’s supports the aims of the new US-led war in the Middle East, that is shoring up US dominance of the world’s most important oil-exporting, and has explicitly endorsed the US-drive to bring

about regime change in Damascus.

Fightback and Syriza

Fightback's irreconcilable hostility to the emergence of an independent political party of the working class committed to a socialist program finds its most explicit expression in their unreserved support for Syriza in Greece. Since coming to power in January Syriza has capitulated to every demand of the European ruling elite represented by the troika of the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank.

Hailed by pseudo-left parties internationally, including by the International Marxist Tendency (IMT) to which Fightback is affiliated, Syriza consciously betrayed the anti-austerity sentiments of millions of Greek workers when it signed up to a deal with the troika on 12 July which effectively transformed the country into a colony of European and German capitalism.

In spite of this miserable betrayal, Fightback has continued to claim that Syriza can offer a way forward. In an article republished from the IMT by Fightback the day after Syriza's betrayal, they argued, "If the Left Platform leaders were to adopt a genuine socialist program and offer a clear opposition to the Memorandum, not just in words and statement, but in actions, they would be able to rally the growing opposition."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, Syriza's Left Platform is desperately trying to posture as opponents of austerity measures, all the better to prevent a decisive political and organizational break with this rotten bourgeois party, and the establishment of an independent party of the working class based on a socialist programme.

The development of an independent and socialist political movement of the working class, which is an urgent necessity under conditions of the deepening capitalist crisis and the drive to war, can only take place through an implacable political struggle to expose pseudo-left tendencies like Fightback. Working people looking for a means to prevent the never-ending assault on their jobs and living standards, and to oppose militarism and the war danger, must make the decision to join and help build the Socialist Equality Party as the Canadian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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