

Canada's trade union-backed NDP mounts "Harper lite" campaign

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After more than two months of running an explicitly right-wing election campaign, which on many issues has been virtually indistinguishable from that of Stephen Harper's ruling Conservatives, Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP) is mired in crisis.

Recent opinion polls put NDP support at less than 25 percent, down sharply from the beginning of the campaign when it was the frontrunner with more than 30 percent support. At this point the trade union-backed NDP is on course to finish a poor third.

The undeserving beneficiary of the precipitous decline in NDP support has been the Liberals, until recently Canadian big business' preferred party of government. The NDP's "Harper lite" platform is so openly right-wing that the Liberals—who when last in office carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, while dramatically reducing taxes on big business and the rich—have been able to posture as to the left of the social democrats on several key issues.

The NDP's campaign has been aimed at demonstrating to the bourgeois ruling elite that it can be trusted with the reins of power and will defend the interests of Canadian capitalism at home and abroad as energetically and ruthlessly as its Liberal and Conservative rivals.

NDP leader Thomas Mulcair has pledged that an NDP government will deliver only balanced budgets, while leaving in place the reactionary fiscal framework created by decades of Liberal and Conservative tax cuts. This commitment to austerity has led the NDP, even before taking office, to start hedging on the few meager promises it has made of increased social spending, such as a national daycare program and a reversal of coming cuts to the federal transfers that help pay for Medicare (Canada's universal health insurance scheme.)

Mulcair has strenuously avoided drawing attention to the rampant growth of social inequality or making even oblique reference to the Liberals and Conservatives as the

political representatives of big business. Instead, he has touted his record as a "responsible public servant" from his time as a cabinet minister in the Quebec Liberal government of Jean Charest.

On the campaign trail, Mulcair has defended remarks he made when he was a Liberal member of the Quebec National Assembly in 2001, effusively praising former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. He has also recruited unabashed pro-business figures, such as former Saskatchewan finance minister and business executive Andrew Thomson, to lay out the party's "business-friendly" approach.

The NDP's main "job-creation" measure is a close to 20 percent tax cut for small and medium-sized businesses—a proposal that also figures in Harper's platform. At the same time, Mulcair has reassured big business that the NDP's much-trumpeted hike in the tax rate for large corporations will be minuscule. An NDP government will raise the rate from the current 15 percent to 17 percent, a figure which, as Mulcair never tires of boasting, is lower than the average during the 10 years of Harper's government.

Mulcair has also explicitly ruled out personal income tax hikes for the wealthy, who have appropriated the lion's share of the gains in real-income over the last quarter-century. He has repeatedly made the astonishing claim that everyone in Canada, including the top 1 percent and .01 percent, is already paying their "fair share."

Mulcair has pledged to be the most effective advocate for Canadian big business on the global stage, promising to play a more active role than Harper in securing markets for Canadian corporations abroad.

The NDP's attempt to cast itself as the champion of democratic rights with its opposition to the Conservatives' draconian Bill C-51, which grants expansive powers to the police and intelligence agencies, has fallen flat and for good reason. Reference to the law

has been restricted to political point-scoring against the Liberals, who voted in favour of Bill C-51. Nothing has been said during the campaign to warn Canadians about the implications of allowing Canada's Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) to flout virtually any law when "disrupting" purported "threats to national security," the creation of an offence of promoting terrorism "in general," or the ability of the police to detain suspects for seven days without charge.

Moreover, the NDP has made no issue of the mass spying on Canadians' electronic communications being carried out by Canada's foreign signals intelligence agency, nor of the other powers given to the country's national security apparatus under successive Liberal and Conservative governments.

In fact, in the name of fighting terrorism the NDP is calling for an additional 2,500 police to be hired at a cost of over \$200 million.

The virtual elimination by the Harper government of the right to strike for federal workers has similarly been passed over in silence by the NDP. And for the same reason: it knows that big business supports the attack on democratic and worker rights.

Since the last election in 2011, the Conservatives have criminalized strikes by Canada Post, Air Canada and CP Rail workers, and last June it rushed a law through parliament, Bill C-377, which imposes significant new restrictions on trade union activity. Mulcair's attitude toward worker rights was exemplified by his recent friendly meeting with Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre, who spearheaded the campaign for Quebec-government legislation that both slashes municipal workers' pensions and dramatically increases their pension contributions. According to press reports, Mulcair and Coderre agreed on everything apart from a state ban on Muslim women wearing the niqab at citizenship ceremonies.

On foreign policy, the NDP's attempt to capture the anti-war sentiment among the population with its pledge to end the Canadian Armed Forces' combat mission in Iraq and Syria is a fraud. Mulcair has vowed that under an NDP government Canada would remain part of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition. While he has failed to explain what Canada's precise role in the coalition would be, earlier this year the NDP presented a plan that called for Canada's military to continue to supply local US-backed forces with weapons and to conduct "humanitarian" operations.

Mulcair has declared his full solidarity with the Harper government's full-throated support for Ukraine's ultra

right-wing government and its provocative deployment of Canada's military on Russia's borders. In last week's foreign policy debate, Mulcair even chastised Harper for not going far enough in imposing economic sanctions against the Kremlin.

Well before the election campaign got under way, the NDP made no secret of the fact that it is eager to enter into a coalition with the Liberals. Mulcair has frequently attacked Liberal leader Justin Trudeau for ruling out a coalition, declaring that his chief concern is to get rid of Harper. This is also the position of the trade union bureaucracy, which is conducting an "Anybody But Conservative" campaign modelled after the campaign it mounted in Ontario in 2014 against the provincial Conservatives. That campaign resulted in the return to power of an Ontario Liberal government that has made massive social spending cuts and criminalized teacher strikes.

Should a federal Liberal-NDP coalition government or a less formal arrangement between the parties come to fruition after October 19, it would represent no less of an instrument of big business and threat to the working class than the reelection of the Conservatives. This is underscored by the abortive Liberal-NDP coalition deal of 2008. It committed an "anti-Harper" coalition government to "fiscal responsibility," implementing a \$50 billion corporate tax, and waging wage war in Afghanistan through 2011.

Like social democratic parties around the world, the NDP long ago junked its milquetoast national reformist program and embraced the austerity agenda and pro-militarist foreign policy of the ruling elite. Like the British Labour Party, Germany's Social Democrats, Australia's Labor Party and France's Socialist Party, the NDP is a big business party—a party that has played a pivotal role in dismantling the welfare-state and redistributing wealth in favour of the rich and super-rich and that employs humanitarian phrases to justify Canadian imperialist aggression and war.

Mulcair—a former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister and an admirer of Margaret Thatcher who in 2006-07 flirted with the possibility of joining Harper's Conservatives—is its fitting representative.



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