

Unifor demands NDP keep silent on Canada-Saudi Arabia arms deal

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During a French-language debate between party leaders held late last month in the run-up to Canada's October 19 election, New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Thomas Mulcair briefly challenged Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper on his government's \$15 billion deal to supply armoured vehicles to the despotic Saudi Arabian regime.

Mulcair, his party badly slipping in the polls, was seeking a wedge to differentiate the NDP from the Conservatives under conditions where his balanced budget economic prescriptions have left little daylight between his party and the pro-austerity policies of Harper.

The arms deal, which was secured thanks to strong support from Canada's government including loan guarantees from the government-owned Canadian Commercial Corp., was signed in 2014. Yet this was the first time that Mulcair had deemed the matter worthy of public comment. As he explained to reporters after the debate, "I think Mr. Harper is in fact breaking the rules that we set up here in Canada a long time ago. Look, you have to look at the record of human rights of people before giving a contract."

However, in the cynical world of "human rights politics" and "humanitarian wars" promulgated by all the bourgeois political parties, certain things are perhaps best left unspoken.

Shortly after Mulcair's statement, an outraged Fergo Berto, Area Director for Unifor—the union that organizes 500 of the 2,000 workers at the London, Ontario General Dynamics plant where the armoured vehicles are manufactured—issued his own statement. Rebuking the NDP leader for criticizing the arming of the Saudi regime, Berto declared, "We asked the NDP to not make this an issue, that it be kept under wraps. There are a lot of (other) issues out there to be talking about."

Berto went on to say that Unifor President Jerry Dias had himself called Mulcair to straighten the NDP leader out on the matter. The call apparently did its job. Mulcair has stayed mum about the arms deal ever since, not even mentioning it during the foreign policy debate a few days

later.

For his part, Liberal leader Justin Trudeau, who also is receiving support from Unifor as part of the union's strategic voting "Anyone but Harper" campaign, declined to be drawn into the discussion during the debate and has likewise remained quiet since.

The opposition parties' unwillingness to attack the government over the Saudi arms deal demonstrates their fear of raising any issue which could endanger Canada's close alliance with US imperialism by offending one of Washington's closest collaborators in the Middle East and which could fuel popular opposition to militarism in Canada. The NDP and Liberals have remained equally mute on the remarkable revelation that top generals from the Canadian and US armies met on several occasions in 2013 to discuss further integration and outright merging of the two countries' armed forces.

The resounding silence from the party leaders on the Saudi arms deal still left the delicate matter for the union of covering its tracks for the public remarks of Area Director Berto.

Unifor promotes itself as a "progressive, democratic and socially responsible" union that opposes war. In reality it has unashamedly backed both Liberal and NDP candidates who have voted for military actions in Afghanistan and Libya and for years it has co-operated with major employers in auto and other industries to ram through concessionary and job-cutting contracts against their own membership.

In a tweet issued by Unifor only hours after Berto's remarks were published in the *London Free Press*, the union stated that Berto "gravely misspoke", thereby "damaging the union and putting the NDP in a very bad position."

Meanwhile, NDP Member of Parliament for London-Fanshawe Irene Mathysen sought to reassure General Dynamics, the Saudis and Unifor. "We don't renege on contracts," she proclaimed. "It's a signed contract and we (i.e., an NDP government) will honour that contract."

The whole episode reeks of the hypocrisy that is commonplace in bourgeois politics today. The deal with the

Saudis clearly runs counter to the stated terms of Canada's export control policy, which bars the export of military materiel to nations "whose governments have a persistent record of serious violations of the human rights of their citizens, unless it can be determined that there is no reasonable risk that the goods might be used against the civilian population."

Such determinations are, however, constantly subordinated to the geo-political interests of Canadian imperialism. Prior to the deal with Riyadh, the bulk of Canadian arms exports were flowing to the United States—a state that has pursued one war of aggression after another for the past twenty-five years and routinely violates international law to carry out summary executions via drone strike.

When Harper was challenged on the deal by Mulcair, as well as Bloc Quebecois leader Gilles Duceppe, the Prime Minister argued that Saudi Arabia was an ally in the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and besides, the agreement, the largest single arms contract in Canadian history, was important for the London area's economy and some of the jobs at General Dynamics. In recent days, Harper has taken to disputing that the General Dynamics deal involves "arms shipments" at all. These armoured carriers equipped with 25 millimetre cannon, are now, according to the Prime Minister simply "transport vehicles".

Here one needs to stop and rub one's eyes. Harper, who has been in the forefront of the US and European sanctions against Russia and excoriation of Putin's intervention in Crimea, and in the denunciation of the Assad regime in Syria on the spurious grounds of promoting democracy and human rights, stridently justifies supplying armoured cars to the reactionary, semi-feudal regime of the Saudi sheiks because they are allies in the various imperialist assaults occurring in the Middle East.

The assertion that Saudi Arabia is a stalwart ally in the fight against ISIS does not bear up to close scrutiny. The Saudis, along with Turkey and an assortment of Gulf Emirate sheikhdoms aided and abetted by the United States, have provided arms and support to ISIS, Al-Nusra and Al Qaeda during the four year civil war in Syria, viewing these Sunni extremist forces as a bulwark against the influence of Iran, Saudi Arabia's main (Shia) rival in the region. Only in the summer of 2014 did Saudi Arabia, at least publicly, renounce support for ISIS.

A key US asset in the oil-rich Middle East, Saudi Arabia has been waging war in Yemen since last March, with Washington's full support. Deploying American-made jet fighters and American bombs, supported by American refuelling flights and with the aid of American logistics and intelligence, a Saudi-led coalition has carried out more than 25,000 air strikes in Yemen against Houthi Shia rebels. The

barrage of air strikes combined with a ground invasion has killed more than 4,500 people, mostly civilians, including a significant number of women and children, who have borne the brunt of the onslaught. The invasion enjoys the full support of the Canadian government. In a March 27 statement on the Yemen war, Defence Minister Rob Nicholson forthrightly declared: "Canada supports the military actions by Saudi Arabia."

While the United States has provided the bulk of the war materiel for Saudis Arabia's international intrigues, Harper's contract to deliver armoured cars to the sheiks is aimed at boosting the regime's ability to suppress internal unrest. Most of the London-made vehicles have been earmarked for the Saudi National Guard. Similar vehicles were deployed to Bahrain in 2011 when Riyadh intervened there to suppress a pro-democracy uprising influenced by the Arab Spring.

Examining the General Dynamics contract last year, a Project Ploughshares report concluded, "the Saudi government's abysmal human rights record is well documented. In directing a crown corporation to actively seek out the contracts, the Canadian government has ignored the high risk that Canadian vehicles will become tools of repression."

As for Harper's "concern" for the jobs of workers, his government has for almost a decade presided over brutal attacks on the Canadian working class that include broad cuts in the federal civil service and the serial tabling of anti-strike legislation to end struggles against wage concessions and layoffs. This ruthless drive has been facilitated by the trade unions, which, as in the case of the Saudi arms deal, have offered no opposition to the government's right-wing agenda.



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