

The Canadian election and the intensification of class conflict

Keith Jones**22 October 2015**

The scale of the popular repudiation of Stephen Harper's right-wing Conservative Party government in Monday's Canadian election surprised the political establishment and the corporate media both in Canada and internationally.

During a decade in office, the Conservatives slashed tens of billions of dollars from social spending, carried out sweeping attacks on democratic rights, and further integrated Canada into US imperialism's military-strategic offensives in the Middle East and against Russia and China.

The entirely undeserving beneficiaries of the popular opposition to Harper were Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party. For most of the past century the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, the Liberals blazed the trail for Harper when they last held office. The Chretien-Martin Liberal government implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, funneled tens of billions in tax cuts to big business, and initiated the revival of Canadian militarism by ordering the Canadian Armed Forces to take a leading role in Washington's wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

Little more than four years ago, the Liberal Party suffered its greatest-ever electoral defeat. Then led by Michael Ignatieff, one of the leading apologists for George W. Bush's "war on terror," the Liberals finished a distant third, polling less than 20 percent of the vote.

Two interrelated factors account for the Liberals' revival. First, important sections of the bourgeoisie lost confidence in Harper. This was epitomized by the call from Conrad Black, one of the patrons of Canada's neo-conservatives, for the election of a Liberal government.

There was concern that Harper had become a lightning rod for social opposition, which has grown in tandem with the collapse of the shale oil boom and the slide of Canada into recession. There was also frustration over Harper's failure to implement key elements of the ruling class' agenda, including his inability to obtain US support for the Keystone XL pipeline and to push through big increases in military spending in the face of popular opposition.

By bringing to power a Liberal government promising

"change" and making limited appeals to popular anger over social inequality and economic insecurity, Canada's ruling class calculates it can fashion a more effective instrument for dismantling public services, gutting social rights, and asserting its interests on the global stage.

Trudeau, whose only accomplishment prior to his selection as Liberal leader was being former Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's first-born, is to be the front-man for a right-wing big business government. He has been tasked with using "progressive" rhetoric, modeled after the tag lines Obama employed in winning the US presidency, and a few high-profile, largely cosmetic policy changes, to repackage the ruling class agenda.

The Liberals have a long history of making "progressive" appeals in election campaigns only to carry out the policy prescriptions of their avowedly right-wing opponents. Trudeau's father secured a majority government in 1974 in the midst of a wages offensive by the working class by mocking the Progressive Conservatives' call for a 90-day wage freeze. One year later, Trudeau announced the imposition of a three-year wage-limiting program.

The second and more basic factor in the Liberals' resurrection is the suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions and the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). As around the world, the ostensible organizations of the working class and the "left" in Canada have for decades functioned as instruments of big business to impose job cuts and concessions on workers and dismantle public services. In response to the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s, these organizations have lurched still further to the right.

The unions have enforced the anti-strike laws adopted by the Harper government and Liberal, Conservative, Parti Québécois and NDP provincial governments.

In 2012, when the Quebec student strike threatened to precipitate a broader movement of the working class against austerity, the unions intervened to shut it down. They declared they would abide by Quebec Liberal government legislation ordering them to do everything in their power to

get college teachers and other union members to assist in breaking the strike. At the same time, they channeled the opposition to the Liberals' austerity measures behind the election of a big business Parti Québécois government. The NDP refused even nominally to support the students or criticize the Liberals' Bill 78.

The principal political expression of the efforts of the unions and the NDP to suppress the class struggle has been their longstanding campaign for a "progressive government"—that is, an alternate government of austerity and war—in which the Liberals would play a central role.

The unions and the NDP have promoted the lie that the Liberals are an ally of working people in the fight against the Harper government. No matter that Harper only expanded the key right-wing initiatives of the preceding Chretien-Martin Liberal government.

In December 2008, the NDP persuaded the Liberals to join them in an abortive bid to form an anti-Harper coalition government. Under the coalition pact, the NDP agreed to be junior partner in a Liberal-led coalition government committed to "fiscal responsibility," waging war in Afghanistan through 2011, and implementing a \$50 billion corporate tax cut.

In 2015, the unions poured millions of dollars into "Anybody but Conservative" strategic-voting initiatives aimed at promoting the Liberals, while the NDP, including in the platform it issued just days before the election, proclaimed its readiness to ally with the Liberals in a coalition government.

With the unions' support, the NDP adopted even more explicitly right-wing policies, with the aim of convincing the ruling class that it would unreservedly uphold its interests. Under the leadership of Thomas Mulcair, himself an ex-Liberal cabinet minister, the NDP mounted a "Harper lite" election campaign, promising four years of balanced budgets, no tax increases for even the wealthiest Canadians, further tax cuts for all but the biggest corporations, and increased military spending.

This opened the door for Trudeau and his Liberals to market themselves as the party of "real change." The NDP, hoping to impress Bay Street, responded by attacking the Liberals from the right.

With the authority of the unions and the NDP vastly eroded due to their complicity in the assault on the working class, various pseudo-left organizations have come forward to keep workers and youth within the orbit of these pro-capitalist organizations, arguing that they can be pressured to the left.

The Canadian sister organizations of the US-based International Socialist Organization (ISO) and France's New Anti-capitalist Party stumped for the pro-austerity

NDP. While they claimed to oppose the "Anybody But Harper" campaign, they all hailed the "Stop Hudak" campaign mounted by the Ontario unions in 2013-14 and on which the unions modeled their 2015 anti-Harper initiative.

The unions' campaign before and during the 2014 Ontario provincial election against Hudak, a close Harper ally, provided the framework for the unions' continued support for the Ontario Liberals, even as they implemented massive social spending cuts and outlawed teacher strikes.

The working class will come into bitter conflict with the Trudeau Liberal government. Its agenda will not be determined by Trudeau's saccharine phrases or the Liberals' duplicitous "progressive" election platform, but by the deepening capitalist crisis and the intensifying geopolitical conflicts to which it is giving rise.

To prepare for the coming struggles, it is essential for Canadian workers to draw a political balance sheet.

From Greece to the auto plants of the US, there is growing working class resistance after years of austerity and war. But it finds no organized political expression. This is because the working class is politically blocked by organizations such as the unions and the NDP, which are implacably opposed to a challenge to the capitalist profit system. They represent not the working class, but privileged layers of the upper-middle class and sections of the ruling class.

To assert its basic interests, the working class must organize itself as an independent political force and fight for the mobilization of workers around the world in a common struggle against imperialist war, the financial oligarchy and the transnational corporations.

This requires the building of new organizations of struggle, above all, a revolutionary party of the working class to prosecute the struggle for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of society. This means building the Socialist Equality Party as the Canadian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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