

Canada: Pseudo-left groups denounce Mulcair, the better to promote unions and NDP

Roger Jordan and Keith Jones
19 November 2015

The dismal performance of the New Democratic Party (NDP) in last month's Canadian federal election has provoked dismay and despondency among the middle-class, pseudo-Marxist organizations Socialist Action, the International Socialists, and Fightback.

Canada's social democrats suffered a crushing defeat on October 19th, losing their status as Official Opposition in parliament, the majority of their seats, and a third of their share of the popular vote.

The NDP's debacle at the polls means "a historic opportunity has been lost," lamented Fightback. The International Socialists (IS) were no less mournful. They declared it a "tragedy" that the Liberals, not the NDP, had capitalized on the mass popular anger against Stephen Harper and his hard-right Conservatives. The IS went on to bemoan the loss of "many MPs who have supported social movements, like Andrew Cash, Peggy Nash and Rathika Sitsabeisan."

Socialist Action spoke in like terms about the ouster of right-wing social democrats from parliament: "Many good MPs, like (Deputy NDP leader) Megan Leslie and Andrew Cash, went down to defeat. They will be missed."

All three organizations were quick to assign all, or virtually all, blame for the political rehabilitation of the Liberals to federal NDP leader Thomas Mulcair and a coterie of his advisers.

Socialist Action and Fightback, both of which function as loyal "ginger groups" within the NDP, are now urging their fellow New Democrats to remove Mulcair as party leader. This, they claim, would enable the NDP to shift left and serve as an instrument of working class struggle against the bourgeoisie's class war agenda.

"The NDP, the only mass, labour-based political party in North America," proclaimed Socialist Action head Barry Weisleder, "remains viable as a potential leftist challenger to capitalist austerity, climate injustice, social inequality, racism, sexism and war."

All of this is aimed at upholding the authority of the NDP and the pro-capitalist trade unions. Yet these ostensibly "left" organizations have suppressed the class struggle for decades, imposing wage and job cuts and other concessions, while assisting the bourgeoisie in dismantling the public and social services that they once held up as proof capitalism could be "humanized."

An important political expression of this has been the unions' and social democrats' boosting of the Liberals—who blazed the trail for Harper by carrying out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history and leading Canada to war in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan when they last held office—as fellow "progressives."

Silence on the unions' "Anybody but Harper" campaign and the 2008

NDP-Liberal coalition

The unions played a critical role in the Liberal election victory. They poured millions of dollars into an "Anybody but Harper" campaign that openly called for the election of Liberal MPs if they were the best placed to defeat the local Conservative candidate. This "strategic voting" initiative was decisive in enabling the Canadian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government to recast itself as a "progressive" alternative to Harper and the agent of "real change." It reached its logical conclusion last week when the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) leadership held a closed-door meeting with newly-minted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to discuss how the unions can collaborate with the new government. (See: "Canada's union top brass fetes Prime Minister Trudeau")

It is remarkable that in their assessments of the election's outcome, Socialist Action, IS, and Fightback manage to utter not a single word of criticism of the unions. They don't criticize them for their support for the NDP's pro-austerity, pro-military "Harper lite" election campaign. Nor do they denounce them for having spearheaded the pro-Liberal "Anybody but Conservative campaign."

Instead, they hypocritically couple criticism of "strategic voting" with conspicuous silence about the very organizations that led the push for it and thereby helped bring to power a Liberal government that is committed to the repackaging of the Conservative agenda of austerity, attacks on democratic rights and the waging of imperialist war.

For at least a decade, the NDP and trade unions have been systematically boosting the Liberals' credentials as a "progressive" party and actively working for a governmental coalition between the NDP and the Liberals.

In December 2008, the NDP, with the enthusiastic support of the CLC and the Quebec-based Confederation of National Trade Unions, agreed to serve as the junior partner in a Liberal-led government. The coalition deal, the implementation of which was prevented only by Harper's shutting down of parliament in a constitutional coup, pledged a Liberal-NDP government to cutting \$50 billion in business taxes, waging war in Afghanistan through 2011, and upholding "fiscal responsibility." Coming just weeks after the eruption of the biggest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression, it underscored that the NDP is fully committed to defending the interests of the Canadian bourgeoisie and its state, and ready to do so in collaboration with its traditional party of government.

Yet for the past seven years, including throughout the just concluded federal election campaign, Socialist Action, the IS and Fightback have kept an almost total silence about the abortive 2008 NDP-Liberal coalition and the anti-democratic methods Harper, with the overwhelming support of big business, used to prevent its coming to power. In the reams of

articles produced by these pseudo-left organizations since 2008, one can find no more than a handful of references to the 2008 NDP-Liberal coalition deal.

Similarly, while urging workers to vote for the NDP on October 19, Socialist Action, the IS and Fightback remained mum about the NDP's publicly proclaimed plans to partner with the Liberals, preferably in a coalition government, once the votes were counted.

Mulcair, to be sure, is an inveterate right-winger. A former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister and self-avowed admirer of Margaret Thatcher, he flirted with taking a post in Harper's government, before becoming the prize recruit of NDP leader Jack Layton's campaign to rally "progressives" from "all parties."

But Mulcair is no aberration or interloper. Like social democratic parties the world over, the NDP long ago jettisoned any commitment to significant social reform or association, however attenuated, with working class struggle, and embraced austerity and war. Throughout Europe, social democratic governments, whether that led by Tony Blair in Britain, Gerhard Schröder in Germany, George Papandreou in Greece, or Francois Hollande in France, have led the assault on the working class, restructuring class relations on behalf of big business through dramatic social spending cuts, privatization, and attacks on democratic rights.

The pseudo-left seeks to avoid discussion of this filthy record because it punctures their claim that the NDP is a "workers' party," "fundamentally different" from its political rivals, due to its organizational ties to the trade unions. Moreover, they seek to conceal their own complicity in the NDP's and trade unions' imposition of capitalist austerity and efforts to channel growing social opposition behind the election of a "progressive" big business government, whether headed by Trudeau or Mulcair.

The "Stop Hudak" campaign and the suppression of class struggle

Socialist Action, IS, and Fightback all promoted and continue to hail the Ontario unions' "Stop Hudak" campaign—the initiative that Canada's unions cited as the model for their pro-Liberal "Anybody but Conservative" drive in the 2015 federal election. Thus Socialist Action, in an article published in late September, praised the outgoing president of the Ontario Federation of Labour, Sid Ryan, for having "rallied the labour movement to defeat the union-hating Conservative Party leader Tim Hudak."

In reality, in the name of "stopping" Tim Hudak from coming to power in Ontario, the unions prevailed on the NDP to prop up a minority Liberal provincial government from the fall of 2012 through April 2014 that imposed steep social spending cuts and criminalized teacher strikes. Then in the June 2014 provincial election, the unions, with Ryan in the lead, stumped for the re-election of the Liberals, helping them regain a parliamentary majority.

Kathleen Wynne's Liberal government, which enjoys the closest ties with Trudeau's incoming government, has intensified its austerity drive and, with the sell-off of a controlling interest in Hydro One, is carrying out the biggest privatization in Canada in a generation—all the while enjoying the continued support of the union bureaucracy.

The phony anti-Hudak protests—a few meetings and demonstrations—that the pseudo-left organizations hail as a "working class struggle" were in fact political cover for the unions' further integration, via their staunch support for the Ontario Liberal government, in the imposition of capitalist austerity.

In effect, the union bureaucracy responded to Hudak's threat to import US-style, anti-worker "right to work" laws by seeking to demonstrate to big business that they weren't needed; because, as officials like then CLC

President Ken Georgetti forthrightly argued, unions play a vital role in ensuring labour "peace" and boosting corporate productivity.

Significantly, although this never finds mention in the pages of the pseudo-left press, Hudak ultimately dropped his proposal for "right to work" laws due to opposition from many of Ontario's largest employers, including the automakers. They told him that they view their union "partners" as an important asset and didn't want that relationship disrupted.

IS, Socialist Action and Fightback followed up their promotion of the "Stop Hudak" campaign by joining the trade union-sponsored Canadian People's Social Forum in August 2014. Billed as a meeting for social activists and protest movements, the Forum was in truth a planning workshop for the launching of a nationwide drive for "strategic voting" and the election of a "progressive" government in 2015. Revealingly, the forum's motto was "Fighting Harper and beyond."

The relationship between the ostensibly Marxist pseudo-left and the union bureaucracy and its reactionary "Anybody but Harper" campaign is further illustrated by the evolution of Mike Palecek, the former Fightback leader who became the head of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers last May. In 18 months or less, Palecek transitioned from being an ostensible Marxist revolutionary to CUPW president and one of the most prominent "Anybody but Harper" advocates. Last week he joined with other CLC leaders in feting Trudeau's election and offering the new prime minister his collaboration. Yet Fightback has not issued a word of criticism of Palecek, nor any explanation of his recent departure from their organization—actions that can only be interpreted as signifying that they are keen to continue collaborating with him.

Breathing life into the NDP

The IS and Fightback have tactical differences over the NDP, with the former preferring to maintain an organizational distance while the latter operates inside it. But both join with Socialist Action in peddling the lie that the NDP is a "workers' organization" that can serve as a "viable" instrument of working-class resistance.

This finds its clearest expression in the call all three organizations are now making for the NDP to emulate the British Labour Party under its new "left" leader Jeremy Corbyn.

IS has urged the NDP be "more Corbyn" and "less Blair." Socialist Action is similarly claiming that the NDP can be "revived" through "left" pressure, adding "we will discover Canada's Jeremy Corbyn as we take up the struggle."

Fightback, for its part, is busily identifying potential candidates for the role of "Canada's Corbyn." Their aim, as they freely admit, is to prop up the NDP and "save" it from collapsing under the weight of its rightwing politics. "Left-wingers such as Niki Ashton and Jenny Kwan," implores Fightback, "must step up and demand a turn to the left and leadership renewal. Alexandre Boulerice in Montreal ... has sometimes leaned left. Erin Weir in Saskatchewan could also play a similar role."

The outcome of Corbyn's campaign has in fact demonstrated the dead end for the working class of any perspective of resuscitating social democracy. Since becoming Labour leader, Corbyn, in the "name of preserving party unity," has capitulated on every major issue to the right-wing which dominates this party of social reaction and imperialist war.

This provides yet further proof that Labour, the NDP and their social democratic partners internationally, together with the trade unions, have evolved over the past quarter-century into right-wing organizations of big business which are impervious and deeply hostile to the interests and aspirations of the working class, differing in no fundamental sense from

their conservative and liberal opponents.

In contrast to Socialist Action and Fightback, IS lays somewhat more stress on what it terms “popular movements” outside of parliament. But this has nothing to do with the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force in opposition to the capitalist social order. Instead, IS conceives of such initiatives as a mechanism to apply pressure on the incoming Liberal government and the trade union apparatuses. After providing a laundry list of the Liberals’ bogus election promises, IS in its main post-election article urged its readers “to build on the anti-Harper mood and begin pressuring Trudeau.”

Socialist Action, the IS and Fightback act as publicists and attorneys for the labor bureaucracies, their suppression of the class struggle and their imposition of the reactionary diktats of big business. While these groups mouth occasional socialist phrases, they are organizations of privileged sections of the middle class and as such are determined to keep the working class under the political domination and control of the unions and NDP.

The systematic exposure of these organizations as an anti-working class and anti-socialist, pseudo-left is essential to the development of a genuine independent political movement of the working class and the building of its revolutionary leadership.

The authors also recommend:

The Canadian election and the intensification of class conflict

[22 Oct 2015]

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers, the pseudo-left, and the “Anybody but Harper” campaign

[31 Aug 2015]

Canada’s International Socialists promote unions’ “anti-Harper,” pro-Liberal campaign

[13 Dec 2014]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact