

Canada's pseudo-left silent on trade unions' support for Liberal government

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Canada's "socialist" pseudo-left groups have spent the four months since the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau came to office fostering illusions about its "progressive" character while covering up their own role, and that of the trade unions and New Democratic Party (NDP), in helping it to power.

The International Socialists, the Canadian co-thinkers of the US International Socialist Organization (ISO), have taken the lead by proclaiming that Trudeau's government, unlike its Conservative predecessor, is amenable to pressure from below. They have called for what they call "popular mobilizations" on everything from the Paris climate change summit to Canada's \$15 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia so as to persuade the Liberal prime minister to live up to his promises to reduce carbon emissions and halt the sale of armoured vehicles to the absolutist Saudi regime.

These pathetic appeals underscore that the IS's talk of "mobilization" is a fraud. Such protests, in which they work hand-and-glove with the pro-capitalist trade unions, sections of the Liberal Party and NDP, and a myriad of NGOs dedicated to promoting identity politics, are aimed at pressuring the bourgeoisie for minuscule reforms and keeping social opposition within the framework of establishment politics. They are the direct opposite of a struggle to build an independent political movement of the working class, uniting the struggles of workers for jobs, against the danger of war, and in opposition to attacks on democratic rights into a conscious anti-capitalist struggle.

An article by anti-poverty activist John Clarke, "The Austerity Agenda in Sheep's Clothing," published by the Socialist Project, led by ostensible Marxist academics Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, exemplifies the pseudo-left's attitude toward the new Liberal government and its political allies in the trade union bureaucracy and NDP.

What is most glaring and politically revealing is the article's radio silence on the pivotal role the unions and NDP played in Trudeau's coming to power and their collaboration and support for the new federal Liberal government, as well as for its close ally the Wynne Liberal government in Ontario.

Clarke is forced to concede the obvious: that the Trudeau government is committed to "deepening" the "austerity agenda." But he hastens to add, "the fact we are not dealing with a hard right" regime "is of considerable significance." The Liberals, claims Clarke, the long time leader of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), are more amenable to pressure. However, he then cautions, pointing to the example of the 12-year-old Ontario Liberal government, that they are also "harder to confront." This is because "They impose austerity more stealthily and have developed considerable skills when it comes to diverting potential resistance into a process of fruitless dialogue."

While bemoaning the convincing nature of the Liberals' "progressive" mask, Clarke is conspicuously silent on who is responsible for providing this wolf with its sheep's clothing. He breathes not a word about the unions' promotion of the federal and Ontario Liberals as a "progressive"

alternative to the Conservatives. Nor does he make even the mildest criticism of the unions—let alone indict them for their systematic suppression of the class struggle—of which their alliance with the big business Liberals is an important political expression.

So anxious is Clarke to cover up for the criminal role of the unions and social democratic NDP, that in an article purporting to discuss the "challenges" in fighting austerity, he fails to make a single mention of either of them.

The trade union-Liberal alliance

The pro-capitalist unions created the conditions in which the ruling class could seamlessly transition from the hated Harper back to a Liberal Party that had been given a quick "progressive" image makeover, by smothering social opposition—including enforcing Harper's anti-strike laws and isolating the 2012 anti-austerity Quebec student strike—and by shamelessly promoting the Liberals as a "progressive" ally.

The union-Liberal alliance was born of the union bureaucracy's terror at the intensification of class conflict, and is part of the same process whereby the unions have responded to the ever widening assault on workers' jobs and social rights by integrating themselves ever more completely into management.

As the mass anti-Tory protests that erupted in Ontario during the late 1990s against Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution" brought hundreds of thousands of workers into the streets and became increasingly radical, the unions recoiled in horror. Fearing that the movement would escape their control, the heads of the Ontario Federation of Labour, Canadian Auto Workers, and the other unions shut the anti-Harris movement down.

Angered that Harris had disrupted the traditional "partnership" between the unions, employers, and government, the union bureaucracy turned to the Liberals with the aim of securing their privileges by forging closer corporatist ties to the ruling class and in the hopes of diverting the working class opposition to the Conservatives into channels that in no way threatened the "competitive" position of Canadian capitalism.

In 1999, the unions formed the Ontario Working Families Coalition, which has been used to pour millions into successive provincial Liberal election campaigns and to boost the myth that this party of big business is a friend of the workers. This helped the Ontario Liberals come to power under Dalton McGuinty in 2003. Having left the key right-wing tenets of Harris's "Common Sense Revolution" in place, the Liberals over the past dozen years have intensified the assault on the working class, slashing public services and social spending while reducing taxes on big business and the rich, criminalizing teacher strikes, and privatizing public utilities like electricity provider Hydro One.

The unions made use of their intimate ties with the Ontario Liberals to spearhead the push for the election of a “progressive” big-business government at the federal level in 2015. The union bureaucracy set up various umbrella groups, such as Engage Canada, to serve as fronts for their pro-Liberal “Anybody but Conservative” campaign, and forked out millions to fund anti-Tory advertising in what amounted to an endorsement of Canada’s traditional party of government.

After Trudeau’s Liberals won office on a tide of phony progressive rhetoric, the union top brass could hardly contain their enthusiasm. The Canadian Labour Congress issued a “congratulations” message on election night, and three weeks later, around a hundred leading bureaucrats met behind closed doors with the new prime minister to pledge their cooperation.

The casting of the Liberals as a progressive alternative was facilitated by the explicitly right-wing campaign conducted by the NDP. Under the ex-Liberal cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair, the NDP pledged to balance the budget, keep income taxes on the top 1 percent at record low levels, and support Canada’s aggressive foreign policy in alliance with US imperialism. Like its social democratic counterparts around the world, the NDP long ago abandoned any commitment to meaningful social reform and has been transformed into a party of big business virtually indistinguishable from its Liberal and Conservative counterparts.

Clarke would rather avoid such uncomfortable truths. They explode his pretensions, and those of Socialist Project, to be implacable opponents of austerity, and would disrupt their political relations with the union bureaucracy and the upper-middle class pseudo-left milieu.

Throughout this entire period, Clarke and the various pseudo-left “socialist” groups, have worked might and main to uphold the authority of the trade union bureaucracy, promoting the pro-capitalist unions as instruments of working class struggle and working to channel any rank-and-file opposition into hopeless attempts to “reform” the unions.

The trial run for the 2015 “Anybody but Harper” campaign was the Ontario unions’ 2013-14 “Stop Hudak” drive—a reference to the provincial Progressive Conservative leader at the time. This campaign culminated in the election, with the unions’ enthusiastic support, of a Liberal majority government in June 2014. But initially it served as the political cover for the parliamentary support the NDP, at the unions’ behest, provided to a minority Liberal government, as it slashed social spending and used strikebreaking legislation to impose real wage cuts on the province’s teachers.

The “Stop Hudak” campaign was enthusiastically embraced by the pseudo-left, with the IS and Fightback asserting that the eventual defeat of Hudak showed that the unions could still mobilize workers in defence of their interests.

In truth, the only major difference between Hudak and the Liberals was a tactical one over how best to impose austerity. The former sought to scale back the influence of the trade unions, including through reactionary US-style “right-to-work” laws, while the latter saw in the bureaucracy a useful accomplice in fulfilling the agenda of big business. Even before the elections, Hudak was forced to back down on his anti-union proposals, because the vast majority of the ruling elite sided with the Liberals, recognizing the bureaucracy’s indispensable function in policing growing opposition in the working class.

Socialist Project’s apologetics for capitalist austerity

Clarke has joined the trade unions in consciously seeking to cultivate illusions among workers about the character of the Liberal government. Including the Liberals among the “moderate austerity forces,” he opines,

“they don’t wish to take things as far and they are more likely to tactically retreat in the face of serious opposition.” Further on, after noting the role of the Ontario Liberals in enforcing austerity, he writes of both levels of government, “They are all regimes that are relatively less able to withstand serious challenge and social mobilization and this makes it easier to win concessions from them and force them into retreats. However, their very method of operating, based on ‘inclusiveness’ and co-option, makes it all the harder to create the critical mass of resistance that makes such victories possible.”

This is all lies. It was the Liberal governments of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin that blazed the trail for Stephen Harper’s Conservatives by imposing the largest social spending cuts in Canada’s history during the 1990s and initiating the revival of a militarist foreign policy by launching wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. At the provincial level, workers have seen their living standards continue to drop as the Ontario Liberals have implemented one austerity budget after another.

Clarke’s reference to the difficulty in creating the “critical mass of resistance” is even more revealing. He gives the union bureaucracy a free pass for its connivance in enforcing the ruling elite’s agenda against the working class, while blaming the working people for the attacks of the bourgeoisie by insinuating they are unwilling to fight back and are politically gullible.

Clarke’s stony silence on the role of the trade unions and NDP in boosting the Liberals’ “progressive” credentials typifies the approach of Socialist Project, which, in its habitual opportunist and cowardly fashion, didn’t officially endorse “Anybody but Harper,” but prominently featured a statement on its website from *Canadian Dimension* that did.

While Socialist Project may make the occasional pro forma reference to the Liberals as a big business or ruling class party, like the rest of the pseudo-left, it does not systematically seek to educate the working class as to the class nature of the principal establishment parties—the Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP—and the class purpose of the competition between them. The three-party system serves as a means for the ruling class to determine its policy, but most fundamentally it is a mechanism through which the ruling elite manipulates public opinion in its own interests and diverts and suppresses social opposition.

Rather than exposing how the ruling class plans to use the Liberal-union alliance to give a progressive gloss to the politics of austerity and war while plotting to use the inevitable popular disappointment with the Liberals to bring the Conservative back to power in the future, Clarke, with his talk of “moderate austerity forces” and of the Liberals carrying out a “balancing act,” fosters the reactionary myth that this party is a “lesser evil”—a party which is amenable to pressure from the workers and ready to use the capitalist state to promote working class interests if only they are subjected to sufficient pressure from below.

Socialist Project’s orientation is not the result of political confusion, but rather flows inexorably from the social forces for which it speaks: a privileged section of the middle class wedded to capitalism and its state institutions, and deeply hostile to the revolutionary strivings of the working class and socialism.

Last year, when the pseudo-left Syriza took power in Greece, Socialist Project leaders Panitch and Gindin travelled to Athens where they spent months in discussions with leading Syriza members, providing a “left” cover for their craven capitulation to the European Union’s austerity dictates. Even after Syriza responded to the massive rejection of austerity in the July 5 referendum by callously defying the popular mandate and agreeing to impose to an unprecedented multi-billion euro austerity package, including the destruction of pensions and vast privatization plans, Panitch and Gindin came to Syriza’s defence. They argued for continued support to the Syriza government and angrily denounced Syriza’s critics as sectarians, while dismissing as ridiculous any suggestion that an appeal to the European working class to build a unified

socialist movement to resist the austerity measures being enforced across the continent was the only viable way forward.

The lesson to be drawn by workers from the experiences in Canada in recent years and events in Greece is that a genuine struggle against capitalist austerity requires a decisive political and organizational break with the trade union bureaucracy, its pseudo-left apologists and the pro-capitalist program they defend. Only through the construction of an independent and revolutionary party based on a program of socialist internationalism can workers resist the ruling elite's twin policies of austerity and war.



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