

Canada's unions hail Mulcair in run-up to NDP leadership vote

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Five major trade unions issued a statement Tuesday reaffirming their strong support for New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Thomas Mulcair. An arch-right winger, Mulcair faces a leadership review or confidence-vote on April 10, the final day of the federal NDP's three-day biennial convention.

Formally Mulcair needs to command the support of a simple majority of voting delegates to remain at the helm of Canada's social-democrats. However, NDP President Rebecca Blaikie has suggested it would be difficult for Mulcair to continue as leader of Canada's third-party if he fails to garner at least a 70 percent approval rating in the mandatory leadership review.

The statement issued by the country's two largest public sector unions—the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the National Union of Public and General Employees—and three of its largest private sector unions—the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), United Steelworkers (USW), and International Association of Machinists (IAM)—hailed Mulcair for his “proven ability to offer” a “true progressive” alternative to the ruling Liberals.

“Mulcair,” continued the joint statement, “is known and respected throughout every part of Canada and has the organic relationship with Quebec to keep and expand our strongest geographic base.”

The unions' intervention on behalf of Mulcair came as nervousness grew within the party leadership over whether he will be able to meet the leadership review test.

The party's abysmal performance in the October 19th federal election—it lost more than half its seats and more than a third of its votes—has prompted some to conclude that a fresh face, less openly identified with right-wing policies, is needed to distinguish the NDP from the Liberals and muster votes from working people and youth.

A poll conducted by Forum Research last month found that a larger percentage of self-identified NDP voters (36 percent) would vote Liberal if an election were held today than approves Mulcair's leadership of the NDP (35 percent).

An ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, austerity advocate, and avowed admirer of Margaret Thatcher, Mulcair declared his intention to stay on at the NDP's battered helm last November after several weeks of post-election reflection.

In an interim report on the NDP election debacle, party

President Blaikie largely attributed it to the social democrats' inability to counter the “progressive” image fostered by Trudeau and his Liberals—in particular the Liberal's promise to “kick-start” a faltering economy through a deficit spending-financed infrastructure program. In contrast, Mulcair ran a “Harper-Lite” campaign, echoing the tired nostrums of the Conservatives about the need to balance the budget at all costs, vowing to increase military spending, and declaring that the super-rich are paying their “fair share” in taxes and would not face any tax increases under an NDP government.

In their statement of this week, the unions sought to defend Mulcair's right-wing record by turning reality on its head. In an interview with the Canadian Press, CUPE President Mark Hancock proclaimed, “The NDP and the labour movement—we like fighters. We like people who are willing to stand up for values and Tom really exemplifies that.”

In a post-election makeover, Mulcair has proclaimed *à la* Bernie Sanders that he is a “democratic socialist,” plumped, somewhat sheepishly, for occasional deficit spending and, in a rather hapless attempt to corral the youth vote, has appeared on a popular comedy show dancing to a hip hop song.

After the release of Blaikie's report, Mulcair issued an open-letter to all party members accepting “full responsibility” for the election defeat and promising to listen more closely to the membership. Mulcair's mea culpas notwithstanding, opposition to his continued leadership has begun to emerge, especially from defeated MPs and the hundreds of now laid-off NDP staffers.

First, Montreal-area riding president Alain Charbonneau slammed Mulcair, declaring, “He was hired, basically—voted in as leader—because he was supposed to be the one who could win. That was his mission. He failed.” Suitably emboldened, thirty-seven Quebec-based party activists including former MPs and other current riding association presidents released an open-letter to the press calling for “party renewal.”

The following day, party clubs at Montreal's McGill and Concordia Universities condemned Mulcair's electoral platform in a press release entitled “Mulcair Must Go.” “We do not feel he shares our values as social democrats,” the statement rather belatedly concluded. “His long career in the Quebec Liberal party leaves him disconnected from the social

movements, unions, and student movements that have traditionally been the lifeblood of the NDP.”

In point of fact, the trade union bureaucracy has been entirely “connected” to Mulcair throughout his four-year tenure as leader and continues to back his leadership. Not only has he been endorsed by most of the country’s major unions in the run-up to next week’s vote; not a single national or provincial trade union leader has, to this point, called for Mulcair to be removed.

While the NDP officialdom now wrings its hand over the Liberals’ electoral success, the reality is it was the unions and the NDP who played the pivotal role in the political rehabilitation of Justin Trudeau and his Liberals.

For years, the unions and social democrats promoted the Liberals as a “progressive” ally in the fight against Harper and his Conservatives. In 2005, the NDP propped up Paul Martin’s tottering Liberal government; in 2008, it formed an abortive coalition with the Liberals; in the run-up to the 2015 federal election, the NDP repeatedly declared its readiness to join a coalition government with the Liberals.

The unions spearheaded the push for “strategic voting”—i.e., the election of Liberals—with a year-long “Anyone but Harper” campaign. Millions of dollars were poured into attack ads and initiatives aimed at persuading union members to vote for the local candidate most likely to defeat the Conservative incumbent.

The unions have also fully supported the NDP’s shredding of its traditional milquetoast reform program. While encouraging the NDP in its embrace of austerity and war over the past three decades, the unions, like their counterparts around the world, have transformed themselves into appendages of corporate management and the state. Notwithstanding CUPE President Hancock’s ludicrous claims about the “labour movement” preferring “fighters,” the unions have systematically suppressed the class struggle, imposing concessions and job cuts and presiding over a dramatic decline in the social position of the working class.

No sitting NDP MP has come out against Mulcair. Some, including British Columbia MPs Nathan Cullen and Peter Julian and the entire Quebec parliamentary caucus, have issued strong statements of support. Nikki Ashton, who represents a northern Manitoba constituency and ran unsuccessfully against Mulcair in the race to replace deceased party leader Jack Layton in 2012, and popular Northern Ontario MP Charlie Angus have caused a stir by politely declining to say whether they will support Mulcair at the upcoming convention.

Those that the corporate media have most prominently identified with the campaign to oust Mulcair are former Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) President Sid Ryan and the misnamed Socialist Caucus, led by the former union functionary and Pabloite anti-Trotskyist Barry Weisleder.

Ryan, a perennially failed candidate of the NDP who was recently pushed out of his OFL position, and Weisleder have

latched onto the examples of Sanders in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn in Britain to argue that the NDP can garner more votes if it “turns left.”

As OFL president, Ryan played a central role in the unions’ support for the Ontario Liberal governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne. This included prevailing on the NDP to support a minority Liberal government that imposed sweeping social spending cuts and criminalized teacher strikes.

Weisleder, who doubles as head of the NDP’s Socialist Caucus and the pseudo-left group Socialist Action, claims that the removal of Mulcair as party leader would open the door to the NDP serving as an instrument of working-class struggle. Ignoring the NDP’s fifty five-year record, Weisleder proclaimed in the wake of last fall’s election debacle that it “remains viable as a potential leftist challenger to capitalist austerity, climate injustice, social inequality, racism, sexism and war.”

Cribbing from the playbook of Sanders, who is seeking the nomination of the Democrats, one of the twin parties of the US capitalist oligarchy, Weisleder is calling for a “political revolution” inside the NDP. By this he means changes to the NDP’s constitution to make the party leadership, which is comprised of right-wing unions bureaucrats, upper middle class professionals, small business people, and politicians “on the make” like Mulcair, somewhat more accountable to the membership.

Even bourgeois commentators have been compelled to point out that Mulcair is hardly an aberration. He has merely continued along the right-ward path blazed by his predecessors, including the much-celebrated Jack Layton, who sought to transform the NDP into a “party of government” by embracing “fiscal responsibility,” ditching the NDP’s rhetorical opposition to NATO, and appealing for support from “progressives” in all parties—i.e. the Liberal and Conservatives.

Weisleder’s antics are aimed at trapping leftward moving workers and youth within social-democracy, which around the world, from Australia’s Labor party to the German SPD and the French Socialist Party, has been demonstrated to be the camp of austerity, war and reaction—in all essentials indistinguishable from big business’s traditional right-wing parties.



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