Canada’s pseudo-left rallies round discredited pro-war, pro-austerity NDP

Roger Jordan
8 April 2016

In the run-up to this weekend’s federal New Democratic Party (NDP) convention, Canada’s pseudo-left has stepped up its efforts to promote this discredited big business party as an instrument for opposing austerity and even fighting for socialism.

The claim that the NDP can be a vehicle of working class struggle is preposterous. But that is no obstacle for the likes of Fightback, the International Socialists (IS), Socialist Action, and the NDP’s moribund Socialist Caucus. However, it does require that they shamelessly distort, falsify and lie about the political record, social composition, and class orientation of the NDP.

All these groups have sought to portray the NDP’s “Harper lite” campaign in the 2015 federal election as a misstep at odds with NDP traditions and largely attributable to the politics of party leader, Tom Mulcair, an ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet minister and self-avowed admirer of Margaret Thatcher, and a small coterie of his advisors and party officials.

On the role the unions have played in the NDP’s lurch to the right over the past three decades, their suppression of the class struggle, longstanding promotion of the Liberals as a “progressive ally”, and support for the abortive 2008 NDP-Liberal coalition—all these groups are studiously silent.

Pointing to the examples of British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and the self-professed “democratic socialist” candidate for the US Democratic Party presidential nomination, Bernie Sanders, the pseudo-left groups are urging the NDP to dump Mulcair and “turn left.” If the NDP patterns itself after Corbyn and Sanders, it will become, like them, a pole of attraction for workers and youth seeking an alternative to capitalist austerity, the electoral fortunes of Canada’s social democrats will revive, and the NDP can fulfill its mission as a workers’ party, fundamentally opposed to the big business Liberal and Conservatives ... or so claim Fightback, Socialist Action and the other pseudo-left groups.

The reality is that the NDP, ever since its founding in 1961, has been a pro-capitalist party closely tied to the right-wing trade union bureaucracy. Over the past three decades, like its social democratic counterparts internationally, the NDP has abandoned even its rhetorical commitment to reformist policies, embraced balanced budgets and capitalist austerity and helped revive militarism, supporting Canada’s participation in one US-led war after another.

One year ago, the pseudo-left groups that are now advocating workers and youth press the NDP to follow Corbyn and Sanders in “turning left” were lauding Syriza (the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left) as an instrument of mass struggle against the austerity diktats of international capital. This was a cruel hoax. A nationalist, bourgeois party, Syriza was utterly opposed to mobilizing the Greek and European working class against the European bourgeoisie and its European Union. Under pressure from international capital, Syriza quickly abandoned its anti-austerity promises, imposing a program of social deprivation that surpassed that of its right-wing predecessors.

While their political histories differ, the function of Corbyn and Sanders is essentially the same: to serve as lightning rods to channel growing anger against social inequality and war in directions that do not threaten the capitalist social order.

With their proposals for a “left” makeover of the NDP, the pseudo-left groups are working to uphold the authority of the social democrats and the trade unions, working to direct the growing anti-capitalist sentiment back toward organizations of Canadian capitalist rule that have for decades played an indispensable role in smothering social discontent.

The fear of the pseudo-left is that the mounting anger produced by decades of wars, attacks on workers’ jobs and living standards, and hand-outs to the corporate elite could trigger the development of a mass upsurge of the working class that bypasses the NDP and trade union bureaucracy. In a recent poll, the NDP garnered the support of less than 12 percent of Canadians.

Fightback, which is affiliated to the misnamed International Marxist Tendency (IMT) and functions as a faction within the NDP, has prominently featured an interview on its website with Cheri DiNovo, an NDP member of the Ontario legislature. DiNovo, whom Fightback “applauds … for standing up to the ruling establishment of the NDP” by calling for Mulcair’s ouster, commented, “Don't give up on the party. I know it's been frustrating for those of us on the left of the party, but this is the vehicle we need to keep fighting through.”

For its part, the International Socialists (IS), the Canadian counterpart of the US-based ISO, is urging the NDP to “join the leap,” that is to endorse the “Leap Manifesto,” a document published last fall under the signatures of Naomi Klein, various ex-politicians—including former Ontario NDP leader and Canadian UN ambassador Stephen Lewis and Ontario Conservative Attorney General Roy McMurtry—and prominent musicians and environmentalists. “After a disastrous election result,” declares the IS, “the NDP has the opportunity of leaping back by embracing the Leap Manifesto.” Far from being a challenge to capitalism or even the political establishment, the Leap Manifesto is directed at winning support from all parties for the transition to a non-carbon economy and for the expansion of the “caring economy,” financed through moderate increases in taxation on big business and the rich.

Arguably the most brazen apologetics for the NDP are served up by Barry Weisleder and his Socialist Action group, which is allied with the French New Anti-Capitalist Party and the Pabloite International. Socialist Action operates within the NDP under the umbrella of the Socialist Caucus, an NDP ginger group it founded in the 1990s and continues to lead.

Weisleder responded to the NDP’s rout last fall by issuing a call for Mulcair to be removed as leader, while baldly proclaiming that the NDP “the only mass, labour-based political party in North America remains viable as a potential leftist challenger to capitalist austerity, climate injustice, social inequality, racism, sexism and war.”

In early March, the Socialist Caucus announced it is running a slate of

© World Socialist Web Site

candidates for senior positions within the party, including Weisleder for party president. So as to underscore its eagerness to work with the party's right wing, the Socialist Caucus subsequently declared that it doesn't want to "takeover" the NDP, adding that it isn't contesting many party leadership positions.

Weisleder and Socialist Caucus's specific role within the NDP is to provide the party and its trade union-backers with a desperately needed "left" cover. Showing that such services are highly valued in ruling circles, Weisleder's call for Mulcair to be removed and the news he was running for party president were prominently featured in the corporate media, including the *Globe and Mail* .

One of the Socialist Caucus's most outrageous claims is its equating of the pro-capitalist trade unions with the working class. At a Socialist Caucus convention held last December, members adopted a resolution hailing the NDP as a party of the working class: "NDP links to labour unions including its receipt of their financial contributions, proudly distinguish the NDP like its Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) predecessor, from the parties of big business as the democratic political expression of the workers' movement in this country."

This is a barefaced lie. Weisleder and the Socialist Caucus, as well as other loyal pseudo-left groups within the NDP like Fightback, equate the trade unions with the working class, when in fact the relationship between them is antagonistic. The unions in Canada, as around world, have responded to the intensification of the class struggle by integrating themselves ever more completely into corporate management structures and the state, including through massive investment funds like the Quebec Federation of Labour's Solidarity Fund, while acting as willing accomplices in the imposition of wage and job cuts.

Weisleder's reference to the unions' alliance with the CCF is revealing for what it omits. This alliance was forged on the basis of Cold War anti-communism, with the social democrats and union bureaucrats collaborating to purge the labour movement of revolutionary-minded workers during the late 1940s and 1950s, and the explicit repudiation of any call for the abolition of capitalism.

Socialist Caucus is conspicuously silent on the labour bureaucracy's role in spearheading the rightward evolution of the NDP. Nor have they uttered a peep about the responsibility the pro-capitalist unions bear for rehabilitating the widely discredited Liberals as a "progressive" party over more than a decade.

Terrified by the emergence of mass working class opposition in Ontario in the late 1990s to the "Common Sense Revolution" of Progressive Conservative Premier Mike Harris, the unions suppressed the protests. They then moved sharply to the right and formed an alliance with the provincial Liberals that has endured during 13 years of Liberal rule marked by massive social spending cuts, huge corporate tax cuts, and the criminalization of teacher strikes. The unions' pro-Liberal "anti-Tory" Ontario election campaigns served as the model for their "Anybody But Harper" campaign in the 2015 federal election, which helped propel Trudeau to power.

Weisleder and his Socialist Caucus are calling for "a democratic revolution" in the NDP to overcome the party's "democratic deficit." This is a red herring. The NDP is a bourgeois party, which like its social democratic counterparts around the world is beholden to the capitalist profit system, has backed a series of imperialist interventions over the past two decades, including the bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, the Afghan War, and the air war against Libya in 2011, and fully accepts the reactionary fiscal framework in domestic politics established by decades of a sustained assault led by the ruling elite against the wages and living standards of the working class—an assault which at every step was ably assisted by the trade unions.

For all their denunciations of Mulcair, Weisleder and the Socialist Caucus whitewash his right-wing role. Their website says Mulcair was not "sensitive" to protest movements like the 2012 Quebec student strike and the native Idle No More campaign. "Had he been sensitive," laments the Socialist Caucus, "had he clearly supported those movements, inside and outside of the House of Commons, we might not have lost so many Quebec seats."

This is a deliberate effort to cover up for the NDP's foul record. Far from not showing enough "sensitivity" towards the Quebec student strike, the NDP left no doubt about which side of the barricades it stood on. It refused to offer the striking students even nominal support; then joined with the Harper government in endorsing the Quebec Liberal government's draconian bill 78, which criminalized the strike and demonstrations on any issue throughout the province.

With their campaign for a new NDP leader, Weisleder and the Socialist Caucus are hoping to pave the way for a figure capable of showing the requisite "sensitivity" to "progressive" politics, i.e., someone in the mold of British Labour Party leader Corbyn who, while spouting "left" rhetoric, upholds the party's pro-big business program and its ties to the union bureaucracy.

Weisleder makes this explicit in an article explaining the reason behind Socialist Caucus's decision to stand a slate of candidates, stating, "Socialism is marginalized in the party constitution and excluded from the election campaign, even while radical ideas are gaining a huge audience in Britain, the USA, and beyond."

The experience of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership refutes Weisleder's pretensions to be organizing any kind of genuine struggle against the right wing of the NDP. Since winning the Labour Party leadership last September, in large measure because of his declared opposition to the reactionary legacy of the faction of the party associated with former British Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, Corbyn has junked one promise after another in the name of "party unity."

Corbyn capitulated on the issue of a British military intervention in Syria, allowing Labour MPs to have a free vote in parliament and thereby providing the government with a strong majority in favour of sending warplanes to the Middle East. He also abandoned his declared opposition to nuclear weapons and the European Union, while embracing the need for austerity policies.

In Britain, the role of Socialist Caucus was played by pseudo-left groups like Left Unity, the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, who all hailed Corbyn as an expression of popular opposition to the ruling elite and capitalism, and claimed that this proved Labour's viability as a workers' party.

Weisleder and the Socialist Caucus's "democratic revolution" in the NDP is a political fraud offering no way forward for the millions of workers and young people across the country seeking to take up a struggle against job cuts, wage reductions, anti-democratic police state measures and the drive to war. Such a struggle is only possible through a decisive political and organizational break with the big-business NDP and its pseudo-left defenders.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site