

Canada's NDP dumps party leader Mulcair

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Canada's trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) voted to oust Thomas Mulcair as party leader at its biennial national convention last weekend.

With 52 percent of the 1,800-plus convention delegates voting in favour of a leadership review, Canada's social democrats must now select a new federal party leader in a process that may run until 2018.

The derisory level of support for Mulcair came as a shock to the party leadership and union officialdom. Never before has the leader of one of Canada's major political parties failed to secure a majority in a leadership review vote. The announcement that 52 percent had voted against Mulcair was, according to media reports, greeted by "stunned silence" on the convention floor.

The convention as a whole reflected a deepening crisis within the party, which has suffered a long series of electoral debacles, most dramatically in last October's federal election, when it lost a million votes and more than half of its parliamentary seats. After the provincial election in Manitoba later this month—an election the pro-austerity, incumbent NDP government is all but certain to lose—the party will form the government in just one of Canada's ten provinces, Alberta.

The convention witnessed competing right-wing factions fighting over its future course. The majority of the delegates gave their backing to the environmentalist "Leap Manifesto: A Call for a Canada Based on Caring for the Earth and One Another." But this was over vehement objections from the Alberta NDP and significant sections of the trade union bureaucracy, who are opposed to the Leap Manifesto's stipulation that no further oil and gas pipelines be built.

The corporate media has rushed to proclaim the Leap Manifesto a "radical document." In fact, it is predicated on support for capitalism, the Canadian state and big business maintaining a stranglehold over socioeconomic life.

Mulcair, a former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister and avowed admirer of Margaret Thatcher who has led the party since 2012, personifies the NDP's rightward lurch over the past three decades. He succeeded his mentor the late Jack Layton, who had sought to position the party as a "moderate" and "fiscal responsibility" force open to collaborating in government with the big-business Liberals, as was done in 2005 when the NDP propped up the Martin Liberal government, and again in 2008 when the two parties reached an

abortive coalition deal.

Like its social-democratic counterparts around the globe, the NDP long ago renounced any commitment to significant social reform and has been transformed into a big-business party in all essentials indistinguishable from the ruling elite's principal parties of government, the Liberals and Conservatives. With the full support of its trade union backers, the NDP has enforced capitalist austerity, applauded the deployment of Canadian military forces in US-led wars and regime-change operations in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Haiti and Libya, and come into headlong conflict with the working class whenever it has held power at the provincial level.

The broad support within the NDP for Mulcair's ouster reflects the awareness that he is too compromised in the eyes of the population to provide the pro-austerity, pro-war NDP with a "progressive" veneer. Mulcair fronted the NDP's Harper-lite election campaign last year—a campaign in which he vowed to balance the budget, increase military spending, and not raise taxes for the rich and super-rich.

With the NDP at pains to demonstrate its commitment to the right-wing status quo, the Liberals—who under Chretien and Martin had blazed the trail for Harper and whose provincial cousins in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia have been slashing social spending for years—were able to make a left feint and cast themselves as the agents of "real change."

A significant portion of those who turned against Mulcair in Sunday's leadership vote were embittered former MPs and NDP staffers, whose plans for careers in parliament and government were dashed by the party's abysmal election performance. Had the NDP's losses been less severe last October, leaving it in a position to realize its ambitions to form a coalition with Justin Trudeau and his Liberals or even prop up a Liberal minority government, there is little doubt that many of those who voted against Mulcair would have been quite happy to support his right-wing leadership.

Mulcair's defeat in Sunday's vote came despite endorsements from the heads of most major unions, including Unifor, the United Steelworkers (USW), Machinists (IAM), UFCW, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

Mulcair reacted to the vote by declaring that he will stay on as party leader until a replacement is chosen. Ken Neumann, the USW's Canadian director and a strong Mulcair supporter, then rushed to bring forward a motion extending the maximum

period before a new leader must be selected from 12 to 24 months. While this motion was accepted by the convention, it is by no means clear that Mulcair will be able to cling to the party leadership for very long. Some NDP MPs indicated Monday that he could be replaced by an interim leader at the end of the current parliamentary session.

Apart from Mulcair's leadership, the major focus of contention at the convention was the Leap Manifesto, which was authored by Naomi Klein, her husband Avi Lewis, and various self-styled native rights, environmental, social justice and antipoverty activists, including Maude Barlow, the National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians and one-time aide to Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

After a fractious debate, about 60 percent of the delegates voted in favour of a resolution that characterized the Leap Manifesto as "a high-level statement of principles that speaks to the (NDP's) aspirations, history and values" and should be debated throughout the party in preparation for its next policy convention in 2018.

However, in a concession to the Alberta NDP and sections of the union bureaucracy, the resolution agreed that specific Leap policies "can and should be debated and modified on their own merits and according to the needs of various communities and all parts of Canada."

This has failed to mollify the manifesto's NDP critics. Commenting on the Edmonton convention's support for it, Alberta Federation of Labour head Gil McGowan told CBC, "I'm spitting angry. These downtown Toronto political dilettantes come to Alberta and track their garbage across our front lawn."

The Leap Manifesto in no way challenges capitalist private property and makes not even a nominal reference to socialism. As Klein and Lewis have repeatedly made clear, their manifesto is addressed to members of all parties, that is, to the capitalist establishment as a whole. It advocates transitioning to a non-carbon economy by 2050, increased support for the "caring" and green sectors of the economy to be financed by higher taxes on big business and the wealthy and by a carbon tax, and a program of economic nationalism like that put forward by US Democratic presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders.

Promotion of the clean energy sector and increased stimulus of the economy through government spending are policies significant sections of the financial and political elite could well support. Responding to calls from the IMF and OECD to take advantage of low interest rates to expand investment in infrastructure, the Trudeau Liberals passed their first budget last month to broad acclaim from the financial elite.

The NDP's pseudo-left cheerleaders, including the Pabloite-led Socialist Caucus and the International Socialists, the Canadian co-thinkers of the US ISO, have lauded the Leap Manifesto. This is part of their reactionary campaign to promote the NDP as a viable instrument of working-class

struggle against austerity and even to fight for socialism if it can be pressured to "turn left."

A concerted effort is already under way to use the manifesto to give the NDP a "progressive" makeover. Stephen Lewis, the former right-wing Ontario NDP leader who went on to become Canada's UN representative under the Progressive Conservative Mulroney government, was given a prominent place on the second day of the convention to speak. The father of Avis Lewis and father-in-law of Naomi Klein, Stephen Lewis used a significant part of his speech to boost the Leap Manifesto, which he later described as an "aspirational" document, i.e. akin to the NDP's avowals in a long ago era to be striving for socialism.

Neil Macdonald, CBC's senior correspondent, celebrated the speech as a "masterful oration" which had reminded the "NDP convention what left-wing means." It has already been suggested that there will be a "Leap Manifesto candidate" in the upcoming leadership race, with Avi Lewis cited as the possible standard-bearer.

The very idea that the big-business, pro-imperialist NDP can be pressured to the left and fight on behalf of working people is absurd. The emergence of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader in Britain demonstrates that the election of a left-talking figure to head the NDP would merely serve to conceal a further shift right. Corbyn, elected on pledges to oppose war and austerity and reject Britain's nuclear weapons arsenal, has capitulated on all these issues and more to his party's right wing in the name of "party unity".

As it is, there is strong resistance within the NDP to any feint "left," no matter how small. Alberta Premier Rachel Notley has denounced the Leap Manifesto in strident terms, vowing it will never form part of the Alberta NDP's policy, so as to reassure Big Oil of her government's fealty. After pledging during last year's provincial election campaign to increase royalties on Alberta's energy companies, the NDP quickly performed an about-face. Now it is set to table a budget that will be aimed at offloading the crisis in the province's energy sector onto the backs of working people though public sector pay "restraint" and cuts to much needed public spending.



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