

Canada: NDP leadership candidates try to cover up its right-wing record

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Four candidates have now entered the race to succeed Thomas Mulcair as leader of Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP).

The party top brass, aided and abetted by the pseudo-left, are desperately trying to generate some excitement in the race, which will be decided in the fall, with claims that the NDP is "turning left" and back to its "social-democratic roots."

The reality is none of the declared or potential leadership candidates has any intention of repudiating the NDP's decades-long support for capitalist austerity and imperialist war.

The candidates are Peter Julian, the former leader of the NDP's parliamentary caucus,

Member of Parliament (MP) Nikki Ashton, who mounted an unsuccessful leadership bid in 2012, and fellow MPs Charlie Angus and Guy Caron.

The leadership contest was made necessary because last year's party convention, to the dismay of the party establishment and most of the trade union bureaucracy, voted to oust Mulcair in a leadership review. A key factor in the vote was rancor among NDP staffers, MPs and ex-MPs at their dashed career prospects after Mulcair led the NDP to a crushing defeat in the October 2015 federal election. Four years after the NDP, under the late Jack Layton, had formed the Official Opposition for the first time ever, it was reduced to a distant third place, winning less than 20 percent of the vote.

All four challengers to succeed Mulcair are determined to bury any substantive discussion of the NDP's 2015 debacle, including their own roles in supporting the NDP's lurch still further right. In so far as mention of it cannot be entirely avoided, they intend to place all blame on Mulcair and a handful of his aides.

When the 2015 election campaign began, the NDP was leading in the polls. To reassure big business that the NDP was ready to assume the reins of power, Mulcair, with the full support of the NDP caucus and the trade unions, responded by mounting a Conservative-lite campaign in which the NDP pledged to balance the budget, eschew any tax increases for even the wealthiest Canadians, increase military spending, and provide "responsible public administration."

The NDP campaign was so right wing that the big-business Liberals, who when they last held office had imposed the biggest social spending cuts in Canadian history and led Canada into a series of US-led wars, were able to posture as the only "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives.

At the first NDP debate, held in Ottawa on March 12, the candidates studiously avoided any mention of Mulcair whatsoever, while cynically claiming to be "left." Ashton took the lead in this. Touting her role in helping get out the vote for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries, she blustered about building a "movement for social and environmental change" and urged the NDP to show it is "proud to be a left-wing party." Directly referencing Sanders's rhetoric, which he used to boost illusions in the Democratic Party before throwing his support behind Hillary Clinton, the preferred candidate of Wall Street, Ashton defined herself as a "democratic socialist."

While politely avoiding reference to Mulcair, all four candidates have worked to play up their relations with his predecessor, Layton, who died only months after the 2011 federal election.

The attempt to portray Layton as a left-wing figure and imply that the party shifted away from this under Mulcair is a fraud—one that speaks volumes about the

candidates' "left" pretensions.

The leader of the federal NDP from 2003 till his death, Layton accelerated the NDP's shift to the right, pressing ahead with shredding the remnants of the party's traditional reformist program. On becoming leader, Layton successfully pressed for the NDP to drop its rhetorical opposition to NATO and supported Canada taking a leading role in the US-led neo-colonial Afghan war. Later, he would press for the purging of any reference to socialism from the party constitution. It was Layton who recruited Mulcair, a former Quebec Liberal government minister, as an NDP candidate and promoted him into the party leadership.

In 2008, Layton oversaw coalition negotiations with the Liberals, reaching an agreement that committed a Liberal-NDP government to imposing C\$50 billion in additional corporate tax cuts, waging war in Afghanistan through 2011 and making "fiscal responsibility" a key priority. What prevented this big business coalition from coming to power was the overwhelming opposition of the ruling elite. It preferred, at that time, to rely on Harper's Conservatives and fully backed his use of the unelected Governor-General to shut down parliament so as to prevent his government's defeat.

To date, the leadership candidates have avoided comment on foreign policy issues. But the party's explicitly pro-war position was summed up by Mulcair, who, responding to the recent Liberal budget, which postponed some spending on military equipment due to problems with the procurement process, remarked, "Canadians have every right to be concerned about that, because we are in desperate need of new ships for our Navy, we're in desperate need of new fighter aircraft for our Air Force, and there's no way that with the type of budget we've seen here that they're going to be getting them."

That this militarist appeal has met with no opposition from within the party comes as no surprise. Beginning with its endorsement of the NATO air war against Yugoslavia in 1999, the NDP has backed every Canadian military adventure abroad, including the Afghan war, the brutal air war in Libya in 2011 that led to the deaths of tens of thousands, and Canada's leading role in NATO's provocative military build-up against Russia. The NDP formally opposes the current Canadian Armed Forces' deployment to Iraq. But it

supports Canada being part of the US war coalition in Iraq and Syria and Canada arming and assisting local proxy forces.

A key role in covering up the NDP's right-wing record falls to various pseudo-left groups, which speak on behalf of privileged sections of the middle class. Fightback and Socialist Action have predictably come forward to claim that Mulcair's departure opens up the possibility of "reviving" the NDP and transforming it into an instrument for opposing "austerity," and even fighting for socialism.

Fightback, the Canadian section of the misnamed International Marxist Tendency, has already emerged as an enthusiastic supporter of Ashton, declaring her to be "standing out on the left." Only they recommend that she adopt more of Sanders's phony socialist rhetoric, so as to better corral workers and youth behind the big-business NDP.

Meanwhile, Barry Weisleder, who doubles as the head of Socialist Action and the NDP's "Socialist Caucus," is helping spearhead a public campaign to persuade former Ontario Federation of Labour President Sid Ryan to throw his hat into the ring. Weisleder and Socialist Action are promoting Ryan—a lifelong union bureaucrat who in 2014 spearheaded the Ontario unions' campaign to return to power a provincial Liberal government that had slashed social spending, broken strikes, and imposed wage-cutting contracts by government-decree—as a "socialist."

Whatever their tactical differences, Fightback and Socialist Action are determined to uphold the political authority of the pro-capitalist unions and the NDP, organizations that for decades have systematically suppressed the class struggle, connived in the destruction of public services and worker rights, and provided a "humanitarian" guise to Canadian imperialism's ever-more bellicose foreign policy.



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