

The Canadian NDP and the Libyan war: Niki Ashton is a liar

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Manitoba MP Niki Ashton is being portrayed as the “left,” even “socialist,” candidate in the race to succeed Thomas Mulcair as leader of the federal New Democratic Party (NDP). The chief role in perpetrating this fraud is being played by Canada’s pseudo-left groups, which have rushed to anoint Ashton as “Canada’s Jeremy Corbyn,” in reference to the left-talking leader of Britain’s Labour Party.

Pseudo-left groups like Fightback and the NDP’s anemic Socialist Caucus are maintaining a conspicuous silence on Ashton’s attitude toward Canadian imperialism’s involvement in wars of aggression around the world. This is because an honest examination of her political record shows that Ashton, like the NDP as a whole, supports the waging of war to uphold the interests of Canadian big business.

In 2011, Ashton twice joined with her NDP colleagues, including current leadership rival Charlie Angus, in voting to support NATO’s bombardment of Libya, which led to the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians, the lynch-mob murder of Muammar Gaddafi, and plunged the North African country into a brutal civil war that continues to this day. In a moment of candour, Canadian Armed Forces’ officers acknowledged that Canada and its NATO allies functioned as “Al Qaida’s air force” in Libya—i.e., worked with Islamist militia, dissident members of the Gaddafi regime and various long-time CIA assets.

The first vote came in March 2011, when the NDP joined with the Liberals and Bloc Québécois in unanimously backing a Harper Conservative government resolution mandating the deployment of CF-18 fighter jets to wage war in Libya. The Greens, then not represented in parliament, meanwhile issued a statement of support, declaring the Gaddafi regime must “not be able to outlast the current UN intervention.”

The NDP played a critical role in providing

“humanitarian” garb for what was from the outset a US-led regime change operation aimed at bolstering imperialism in North Africa, which had been shaken by the overthrow of longstanding US-backed dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia. Invoking the liberal imperialist “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) doctrine—which Canada and then Liberal leader and prominent Iraq war enthusiast Michel Ignatieff had played a major role in formulating in the early 2000s—the NDP justified its support for the NATO intervention in Libya with the lurid, never substantiated, claim that this was the only way to prevent Gaddafi from massacring the population of Benghazi.

The NDP and Ashton’s second vote in favour of the bombardment of Libya came three months later, in June, when the character of the intervention as a deliberate act of aggression to topple the Gaddafi regime had been spelt out in blood. By then, a Canadian general had taken command of the NATO war in Libya, where Canadian aircraft would fly some 1,500 sorties by the end of the intervention in October. On this occasion, there was a single dissenting vote—but not from Ashton or any other member of the now more than 100-strong NDP caucus, but from the Greens’ Elizabeth May.

In none of the laudatory interviews published by the pseudo-left Fightback and International Socialist groups, and in *Jacobin* magazine, do the interviewers dare to ask Ashton about this episode. The only time it has even been alluded to was in a private conversation between radical journalist Yves Engler and Ashton—a conversation that Engler later reported on his blog.

Engler wrote, “I asked Niki Ashton whether she voted in favour of bombing Libya. The NDP leadership candidate said she and a few other MPs sought to dissuade then leader Jack Layton from supporting the NATO war. Failing to convince him, Ashton said she couldn’t remember if she voted Yes on Libya.”

This is a transparent lie. By pleading political amnesia,

Ashton clearly was seeking to bolster her very modest “left” credentials under conditions where widespread popular opposition exists to Canada’s involvement in brutal US-led military interventions around the world, from its participation in the 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia to its leading role in enforcing the neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan, the onslaught on Libya, and the current US war in Iraq and Syria.

The *World Socialist Web Site* doesn’t believe for a moment Ashton’s claim of a memory lapse. But, for the sake of argument, what if she were telling the truth and cannot remember how she voted, on two separate occasions and three months apart, on the Libya war—and under conditions where every other NDP parliamentarian lined up with the Conservative government in support of war?

It would be difficult to imagine a more telling admission of Ashton’s lack of political seriousness.

The question of support or opposition to imperialist war puts all political tendencies to the test and reveals where their true class interests lie. Moreover, as twice before in the last century, the crisis of capitalism is leading to a massive intensification of great power and imperialist conflict—in which Canadian imperialism is playing a major role—placing the struggle against war at the very center of the struggle for socialism.

If Ashton genuinely tried to persuade Layton to oppose Canada’s participation in the Libya war, why did she not raise this issue publicly? Why are there no press accounts of any debates within the NDP caucus, never mind on the floor of the House of Commons? Why did she, or her alleged supporters within the NDP, not call for public demonstrations to oppose the conflict? And why, if her parliamentary colleagues refused to listen to her, did she not take a principled stand and vote in the House of Commons against the dropping of Canadian bombs on Libya’s towns and cities?

The answers to these questions are all too obvious. Ashton, a member of the NDP establishment who has served in parliament for close to a decade, is not opposed in principle to Canada deploying its military might around the world to uphold the interests of the corporate elite. She has no intention of mobilizing popular opposition against war, or any other of the pressing issues arising out of the deepening capitalist crisis, such as rising social inequality, attacks on democratic rights, and the persecution of refugees. Instead, she seeks to use left-sounding rhetoric, which is amplified by her pseudo-left cheerleaders, to dupe workers into believing that the NDP

can be made to stand up and fight for their interests.

This is precisely the role Corbyn has played in Britain. Since becoming Labour leader on the basis of left and even socialist rhetoric, he has capitulated time and again to the party’s right wing, including by allowing them to vote in favour of war in Syria and the retention of nuclear weapons. It was also the role played in the US by Bernie Sanders, with whom Ashton campaigned and who she regularly cites as an inspiration. After attracting millions of voters with his claim to be a socialist, Sanders threw his weight behind the preferred candidate of Wall Street and the military in last year’s election, Hillary Clinton.

To give Ashton her due, her vote in favour of the Libyan war was not chiefly a personal failing. She is a member of a political party that has loyally endorsed every military adventure in which Canada has been involved for the past two decades. The NDP embraced the fraudulent “humanitarian” pretext used by the Liberals and Conservatives to legitimize the bombing of Belgrade, backed Canada’s role in the neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan and even agreed in 2008 to form a coalition government with the Liberals on a pledge to wage war in that impoverished Central Asian country for a further three years.

The NDP gave its tacit approval to the US-led military deployment to Haiti to oust its elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and has echoed the anti-Russia agitation of successive Conservative and Liberal governments that has led to the stationing of 450 Canadian troops on Russia’s border and a mission to train the Ukrainian army.

Workers and young people seeking genuine opposition to the growing war danger, exemplified by the Trudeau government’s pledge to support the Trump administration as it issues reckless threats against North Korea, will not find it in the NDP. Only by breaking decisively from any illusions in this pro-war, pro-capitalist party and turning to the building of a new anti-war movement based on an internationalist and socialist program can the fight against war, and the capitalist system which gives rise to it, be conducted.



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