British Columbia NDP government abandons $15 minimum wage pledge

Roger Jordan
11 September 2017

After less than two months in office, British Columbia's New Democratic Party (NDP) government has junked its election pledge to raise the province's minimum wage to $15 over the next four years, i.e., by 2021.

The NDP's failure to enact this meager reform—which would still leave minimum-wage workers well below the poverty line— thoroughly exposes the fraudulent claims peddled by the trade unions and pseudo-left groups like Fightback and the International Socialists (IS) that the installation of an NDP government in Victoria represents a step forward for workers.

Labour Minister Harry Bains made the announcement after the government was criticized by the Green Party for stipulating a four-year timeline for the wage increase. The NDP, which holds 41 out of the 87 seats in the BC Legislative Assembly, is dependent on the support of three Green MLAs to govern. Andrew Weaver, the Greens' leader, insisted that a so-called Fair Wages Commission, which will undoubtedly be stuffed with representatives of big business, be given full authority to determine the timeline for future minimum wage increases.

Bains quickly fell into line, telling the *Vancouver Sun* less than two weeks after publicly committing the government to the four-year timeline, "I think Mr. Weaver made a pretty good point. We're going to work with him. He's saying that we should not be prescriptive of the Fair Wages Commission and I agree with him. I think we should give them the authority and mandate to decide when we reach $15, and how we reach $15." As if to underscore the point, Bains added that the timeline could be "anything they come back with."

The fact that the NDP is incapable of implementing such a meagre reform speaks volumes about the anti-working class, pro-big business character of this party. After 16 years of Liberal rule, in which public services and social spending were cut to the bone, Premier John Horgan has repeatedly boasted that his government will enforce the Liberals' reactionary fiscal framework, as enshrined in their most recent budget, including by presenting "balanced" budgets for at least the next two years.

The NDP has already quietly dropped other parts of its election program. Its first Throne Speech, delivered last Friday, made no mention of a promised $10 per-day province-wide childcare system, saying instead that the government would work to provide an "accessible and affordable" daycare program.

A promise to give a $400 rebate to renters, who are being hard-hit by massive rent increases in Metro Vancouver and Victoria, was also conspicuously absent. In August, Horgan also softened the government's tone significantly on its opposition to the environmentally destructive Kinder-Morgan pipeline expansion.

Not surprisingly, the NDP's about-face on the minimum wage has been warmly welcomed by the corporate elite. Ian Tostenson, head of the BC Restaurant and Food Services Association, a body representing employers in a sector where workers are ruthlessly exploited for low pay, enthused, "It's a good sign for the government to say let's have some flexibility on how we get there. I think they really truly want to have a process where they can work with industry."

Even if a $15 minimum wage were adopted tomorrow, it would hardly begin to address the widespread poverty in British Columbia, which has the highest poverty rate of any province in Canada at over

© World Socialist Web Site

12 percent. In Vancouver, the living wage, i.e. the minimum wage for a worker to avoid living below the poverty line, is over $20.

The NDP's pseudo-left cheerleaders, who declaim incessantly on the need to push the party to the "left" and even claim that it can serve as an instrument to fight for socialism, have responded to the BC government's abandonment of the minimum wage timeline with an embarrassed silence. IS, which applauded the NDP's four-year timeline announced in mid-August as "undoubtedly a win for the larger Fight for $15 in Canada and the United States," has not published any article addressing how and why this "win" could so quickly vanish into thin air. Instead, IS continues with its desperate efforts to cover the NDP's exposed posterior by urging its members to participate in the upcoming federal NDP leadership contest.

The BC Federation of Labour, which pumped vast resources into election ads targeting Liberal leader Christy Clark and promoting the NDP, found the time to release a statement on the NDP's Throne Speech which noted vaguely that the union federation wanted to see the minimum wage increase "as soon as possible." The NDP's retreat from its election promise did not stop the union bureaucrats from applauding the government for advancing a "new approach that puts people first."

The "new approach" which is being so enthusiastically welcomed by the unions and pseudo-left organizations is the integration of their leading personnel into government committees and commissions, and even in some cases into government office.

Horgan made clear during his first meeting last month with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that he is fully committed to close cooperation with the big business Liberal federal government, which enjoys close ties with the union bureaucracy (See: "Canada: BC's new NDP Premier pledges to work closely with Trudeau").

Bitter experience across Canada has shown that workers' lives will see no improvement under an NDP government. Rather it will serve as an instrument of big business in enforcing the ruling-class agenda of austerity and war. Whenever Canada's social democrats have held power during the last four decades, they have come into headlong conflict with the working class, including by slashing public services, imposing wage-austerity and breaking strikes. In neighbouring Alberta, where the NDP has governed since 2015, it has offloaded the economic crisis caused by the oil-price collapse onto the backs of working people, while maintaining the low-tax rates for big business and the wealthy for which the province has long been notorious.

The NDP's record in power underscores that even the most immediate demands raised by workers to resist the never-ending assault on their jobs, living conditions, and social rights can be realized only in struggle against all of the pro-capitalist parties and their defenders. Workers cannot shield themselves from the capitalist crisis, let alone reverse the years of concessions and cutbacks, by pressuring the NDP politicians or union bureaucrats, but must rather fight for wage increases, job security, a vast increase in public spending, and access to social and cultural services as part of a broader struggle to bring to power a workers' government committed to socialist policies.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site