

“Love and courage”—Canada’s NDP elects Obama-style pitchman as leader

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Canada’s New Democratic Party (NDP) elected Jagmeet Singh as its new leader on the first ballot of its leadership vote last Sunday. His victory represents a further shift to the right by Canada’s social democrats and underscores that this big business party long ago abandoned any connection with the working class or even the fight for significant social reform.

Singh has been a member of Ontario’s provincial parliament since 2011, and served as deputy leader of the Ontario NDP from 2015 till his entry into the federal party leadership race last May. He was heavily involved in the ONDP’s right-wing 2014 election campaign, which so openly advocated the interests of the corporate elite that it enabled Kathleen Wynne’s budget-cutting and privatizing Liberal government to pose as to the left of the NDP on important issues and secure re-election.

In keeping with this, Singh made no criticism of the NDP’s record during his leadership campaign. The NDP’s endorsement of Canada’s leading role in US-led wars; the implementation by every NDP provincial government since the early 1990s of vicious austerity; the NDP’s attempt between 2004 and 2015 to partner with the Liberals in a national coalition government; and the party’s “Harper lite” 2015 federal election which saw the NDP pledge balanced budgets and no tax increases for the rich—none of these stances were so much as touched upon by Singh during his campaign.

On the contrary, in his victory speech Singh praised outgoing party leader Thomas Mulcair, saying that the former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister had led the party through a difficult period since succeeding the late Jack Layton in 2012 and that the NDP owed him a debt of gratitude.

Singh’s campaign focused largely on his youth, Indian ethnic background and Sikh religion, and his purported ability to grow the party by appealing to immigrants. Singh made much of his personal experience with racial police profiling (carding) and his rise to prominence from an immigrant family living in trying circumstances.

This won him the backing of the party establishment, which saw the installation of the first-ever “person of colour” as the leader of a mainstream federal party, as a means of giving the NDP an air of change, while continuing the same right-wing orientation, and of using identity politics to appeal to sections

of the upper middle class.

Singh’s campaign stump speech was almost entirely built around his personal narrative and peppered with invocations of his vapid “love and courage” mantra. His intellectual depth—or lack thereof—was underscored by his pronouncement that a courtesy call from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau welcoming his leadership win was “pretty cool.”

In the end, Singh’s first ballot victory was based on mobilizing little more than one-quarter of the party’s 124,000 members. Singh secured 35,266 votes of the 65,782 votes cast.

While the campaign was touted by the party officialdom and the pseudo-left—which vigorously promotes the lie that the NDP is a “working-class party” because of its links to the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy—as a golden opportunity to expand the NDP, less than 50,000 new members were recruited during the more than year-long leadership race. Currently the NDP has 15 percent support in the opinion polls, down from the 19 percent it secured in the disastrous 2015 election campaign.

Canada’s corporate media promoted Singh’s leadership bid and has enthused over his victory. John Iveson, writing in the right-wing *National Post*, applauded Singh’s triumph last Sunday, describing the party’s new leader as an “Obama candidate.”

This comment gives away more than Iveson perhaps intended. Obama, a well-connected figure within the Democratic Party who was promoted with hollow promises about “change” and “hope,” led a right-wing, anti-working class government which intensified the wars of his predecessor, George W. Bush, stepped up the assault on the working class by slashing workers’ wages in auto and other sectors, and organized the largest transfer of wealth from working people to the corporate elite in history through the bailout of Wall Street.

A Singh-led government would be no less determined to uphold Canadian capitalist interests at home and abroad. The long list of policies on his web site, within which racial and gender politics play a prominent role, studiously avoids any mention, let alone criticism, of Canada’s role in supporting US military-strategic offensives around the world and of the Trudeau government’s plans to hike military spending by 70 percent over the next decade and use “hard power,” i.e. war, to

advance Canada's "national interests." This is a silence that bespeaks support.

Singh's right-wing orientation earned him the enthusiastic support of wealthy NDP supporters from the trade union bureaucracy, the professions and business. Despite entering the race long after it began, Singh raised close to twice as much money as his nearest rival. Underscoring the absurdity of media attempts to portray Singh as an outsider, 77 people gave his campaign the maximum donation of \$1,550 allowable under Canadian election law. Charlie Angus, his nearest rival, had just three such donations, while fellow leadership candidates Nikki Ashton and Guy Caron had none.

The only concern about Singh's leadership credentials within the NDP top brass concerned his prospects in Quebec. In 2011, when the party became the official opposition, more than half its MPs were elected from the province. Although under Mulcair the party lost badly in 2015, more than a third of the NDP's 44 MPs were elected from Quebec.

Bowing to the xenophobic and chauvinist climate whipped up in Quebec over the need to defend "Quebec values"—which has found its latest expression in the provincial Liberal government's attempt to ban Muslim women wearing the burqa or niqab from accessing health care, education and other public services—some within the NDP have expressed doubts about Singh's ability, as a practicing, turban-wearing Sikh, to effectively campaign in the province. One Quebec NDP MP has already signaled that Singh's election as leader and opposition to Bill 62 could cause him to quit the party and align himself with the chauvinist, pro-Quebec independence Bloc *Québécois* and its sister party at the provincial level, the *Parti Québécois*.

The leadership race has underscored that, like social democratic parties around the world, the NDP is all but indistinguishable from its big-business political rivals and is trying to outdo them in demonstrating its loyalty to the capitalist state.

This has not stopped Canada's pseudo-left groups from claiming the NDP can be pressured into opposing austerity and even be transformed into a vehicle for fighting for socialism.

Fightback and Socialist Action officially endorsed the leadership bid of Manitoba MP Niki Ashton, promoting her as a "left-winger" and even "socialist" who would follow in the footsteps of British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and "revive" the NDP by employing reformist rhetoric more akin to that the party used in the 1960s and 1970s.

Ashton secured little more than 11,000 votes or 17 percent of the total, underscoring that for the vast majority of the NDP's membership even Ashton's tepid policies were too radical.

The main concern of Fightback and Socialist Action, whose members lead the Socialist Caucus within the NDP, is to insist that workers and young people join and build the NDP to pressure it to the "left." Both groups issued statements on Singh's victory containing the bogus assertion that Ashton's

campaign had pushed all the candidates to the "left."

Fightback dishonestly wrote that "none of the leadership candidates defended the politics of the Blairite right-wing, and nobody could be considered a Mulcair continuity candidate. All rejected austerity, and all proposed progressive taxation and wealth redistribution." Therefore, "it is vital that those politicized by the Ashton leadership campaign do not lose hope and drop out of the movement. Conditions can change, and this leadership campaign has provided a great platform for the future growth of socialist politics in the party."

This is all lies, with the singular goal of preventing working people breaking once and for all from the nationalist, pro-capitalist politics of the NDP and trade unions.

Pseudo-left groups like Fightback and Socialist Action have no intention of fighting for "socialism," but rather seek to shackle workers and youth to electoral and establishment politics so as to prevent the emergence of the working class as an independent political force.

This is illustrated by their continued promotion of Jeremy Corbyn as a model for Ashton and the NDP. Yet, since becoming Labour leader in 2015, Corbyn has conceded time and again to the Blairite right wing in the name of party "unity", including on Britain waging war in Syria, the implementation of austerity by Labour-controlled local authorities, and the refurbishing of Britain's Trident nuclear weapons program.

The true goal of Corbyn and his pseudo-left cheerleaders was revealed earlier this week, straight from the horse's mouth, when Corby's closest ally and shadow Chancellor (finance minister) John McDonnell told a meeting that Labour's principal goal is to "stabilise capitalism."

The author recommends:

Corbyn ally John McDonnell declares Labour's mission is to "stabilise capitalism"
[5 October 2017]

Why is Canada's pseudo-left rallying behind NDP leadership candidate Niki Ashton?
[16 September 2017]



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