

The fraud of the “left turn” in Canada’s NDP

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Even many commentators in the corporate media noted the lacklustre character of the federal New Democratic Party (NDP) convention held in Ottawa last weekend. Amid deepening geopolitical rivalries that could trigger a major war on the Korean peninsula or in the Middle East, attacks on democratic and social rights, and the reemergence of working class struggle in Canada and internationally, the social democrats only mustered a few tepid criticisms of Liberal government policy—criticisms that three years ago could just as well have been made by the current prime minister, Justin Trudeau.

The centerpiece of the gathering was a keynote address by the NDP’s new federal leader Jagmeet Singh, a darling of the party’s right-wing establishment and former deputy-leader of the Ontario NDP. Singh’s vapid, Obama-style politics—epitomized in his “love and courage” motto—infused a 40-minute speech in which he made clear the continuity of his leadership with that of his right-wing predecessors, Thomas Mulcair and Jack Layton.

Singh criticized mounting social inequality and outlined a few tepid reform proposals, including a government-run pharmacare system, extra funding for housing, and increased taxation on the “ultra-rich,” causing the pseudo-left Fightback to gush that “the message” seems “finally have gotten through” that “reformism without reforms” is “not what people want “to hear.”

In reality, the NDP remains as subservient to big business, and as pliant a tool of the capitalist elite in dissipating and derailing social opposition, as ever. Anyone who claims otherwise either suffers from political amnesia or is out to deceive the population. Every single provincial NDP government that has held power in Canada during the last three decades, from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, has imposed social spending cuts, cuts in public sector workers’ real wages, and tax hikes for working people. This was true of Bob Rae’s Ontario NDP government in the early 1990s, as it is of the current Rachel Notley-led NDP government in Alberta, which collaborates closely with the province’s big oil corporations and has imposed austerity measures during the three years it has held office.

The NDP’s pro-war record

The true orientation of the NDP and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy was most strikingly demonstrated at last weekend’s convention by their shameful and complicit silence on Canadian imperialism’s major role in Washington’s military-strategic

offensives around the world.

Since its release last June, Canada’s social democrats have maintained virtual radio silence on the Liberal government’s new national defence policy, which includes a pledge to hike military spending by 70 percent over the next decade. And that silence continued last weekend.

The biennial NDP convention was held just one month after Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland co-hosted a conference with Trump’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Vancouver, which reassembled the US-led coalition that waged war on the Korean Peninsula from 1950-53. Yet the NDP did not see fit to criticize the Vancouver summit, nor Freeland’s and Trudeau’s repeated statements pledging solidarity with the US as it threatens to “annihilate” the North Korean people.

This is because the NDP is a pro-war, pro-imperialist party. Beginning with the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, it has endorsed Canada’s participation in an ever-lengthening list of US-led wars and interventions, including the Afghan war, the “regime change” war in Libya, and the 2004 ouster of Haiti’s elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Given this record, it should come as no surprise that party officials resorted to anti-democratic maneuvers to suppress discussion on a number of resolutions deemed too controversial, including several criticizing Israel’s brutal oppression of the Palestinians.

Last weekend’s convention was the first since Mulcair was unceremoniously dumped as leader in April 2016, following the party’s disastrous performance in the 2015 federal election. When the election was called in August 2015, the NDP was poised, according to the polls, to become the largest party in parliament for the first time ever. But with the backing of the NDP and trade union top brass, Mulcair, a former Quebec Liberal government minister, waged a campaign that was even more right-wing than Trudeau’s. Mulcair pledged to balance the budget at all costs, spurn any tax increases even for the top 1 percent, further increase military spending, and join with the big business Liberals in a post-election coalition or alliance to form a “progressive” alternative government to Harper and his Conservatives.

There was no criticism of any of this from the rostrum of last weekend’s convention, only promises that the NDP will henceforth think and act “bolder.”

In some respects, Singh’s speech and the NDP convention marked a further shift right. The NDP made no issue of the Liberal government’s Bill C-59, which in the name of “reforming” Harper’s Bill C-51, enshrines the vast new powers the Conservatives gave Canada’s national security apparatus in 2015

in the name of fighting terrorism. In fact, Bill C-59 not only sanctions the Canadian Security Intelligence Service breaking of virtually any law to disrupt vaguely-defined “threats” to national security; it gives the Communications Security Establishment new offensive cyber-war powers.

In keeping with the NDP’s studious avoidance of most foreign policy issues, Singh had nothing to say about the Trudeau government’s efforts, notwithstanding tensions with Trump over the renegotiation of NAFTA, to deepen Canada’s military and strategic partnership with the US, including by “modernizing” NORAD. This underscores that Singh and the NDP establishment, like their bourgeois masters, support Ottawa’s continued close cooperation with US imperialism as the best way to advance Canadian big business’ predatory global interests.

The pseudo-left and the NDP

The *Toronto Star*’s Chantal Hebert aptly observed that the convention showed that the social democrats are struggling to differentiate themselves from the big business Liberals. Singh’s keynote speech, added Hebert, “fell well short of being a major departure from the party’s recent past.” “The notion,” she continued, “that the weekend’s deliberations have put the NDP on the path of a shift to the left mostly goes to prove that movement on the Canadian political spectrum is often in the eye of the beholder.”

The chief role in concealing this reality falls to the various middle class pseudo-left groups which operate within the NDP and on its periphery. Socialist Caucus (a faction within the NDP led by members of the Pabloite Socialist Action group), Fightback (which also functions as a loyal NDP faction and is the Canadian section of the misnamed International Marxist Tendency), and the International Socialists (who maintain formal organizational “independence” from the NDP) all continue to advance the absurd claim that this pro-war, pro-big business party can be pressured to the “left” and serve as an instrument of working people in fighting austerity and even for socialism.

In this, they are reprising the role played by their pseudo-left counterparts in Britain, who have hailed Jeremy Corbyn’s election as leader of the Labour Party. Corbyn won overwhelming support with his pledges to end austerity and the UK’s nuclear weapons program, but promptly junked them once he became leader in 2015 and has otherwise compromised with the Blairite party on every essential issue. Corbyn has instructed Labour-led local authorities to implement Tory austerity measures, allowed the party’s right wing to give the Conservatives the votes they needed to wage war in Syria, and has abandoned his opposition to the Trident nuclear weapons program.

Corbyn’s aim was never to return the Labour Party to “socialism,” but to ensure that radicalized young people and workers remain confined within the straitjacket of Labour, which for a century has been one of the two principal parties of British imperialism. Corbyn’s close collaborator and Shadow Chancellor,

John McDonnell, summed up their goal when he told a Labour activists’ meeting last October that they have to “save capitalism.”

During last year’s NDP leadership contest, the pseudo-left desperately sought to find a candidate to “Corbynize” the NDP. Fightback plumped for Niki Ashton, who twice voted for Canada’s involvement in the bombardment of Libya in 2011, declaring her to be Canada’s Corbyn. When the WSWS exposed Ashton’s war-mongering record, Fightback was outraged. (see: “The Canadian NDP and the Libya war: Niki Ashton is a liar”)

The campaign to “Corbynize” the NDP continued last week with an event entitled “Courage to Leap,” held on the sidelines of the convention and promoted by the International Socialists. It was organized by a group calling itself “Courage” and by supporters of the Leap Manifesto. The latter is a nationalist document advocating “social justice” and the transition to a “green” economy within the confines of capitalism and the nation-state system. Its principal authors and champions are Naomi Klein and her husband, the filmmaker and scion of the NDP’s “first family,” Avi Lewis.

The goal of the “Courage to Leap” meeting was to convince the approximately 300 in attendance that the NDP could be transformed into a fighting organization for working people. It was addressed by Emma Rees and Adam Klug, two leading Corbyn campaigners in the UK, and by Becky Bond, a political adviser to Bernie Sanders—the “independent” US Senator who used socialist rhetoric to trap leftward-moving workers and youth within the big business Democratic Party and the Hillary Clinton campaign for US president.

Nobody cared to address the fact that Klein’s and Lewis’ Leap Manifesto is an explicitly pro-capitalist document that was even circulated among Liberal Party politicians when it was first released in the fall of 2015. This was summed up perfectly by Lewis, when he wrote in the *Globe and Mail* that Leap is a “Marshall Plan for employment,” a reference to Washington’s plan to revive capitalism in western Europe after World War II, so as to forestall social revolution, provide markets for US goods, and create a stronger base for waging the Cold War.



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