The fraud of the Ontario NDP's "left" election platform

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The New Democratic Party's (NDP) tepid platform for the June 7 Ontario election is being touted by media outlets, the trade unions, and the pseudo-left as a bold "left" turn and a return to the party's social-democratic roots. Such claims only underscore how far to the right bourgeois politics has shifted in Canada.

To much media acclaim, NDP leader Andrea Horwath was the first of the three main party leaders to present her election platform. It includes pledges of modest increases in healthcare, education, and social spending—pledges that only appear generous in contrast with the ruthless austerity implemented by successive Ontario Liberal governments, in collusion with the trade union bureaucracy.

Horwath pledged to implement a $12-a-day childcare program (with fees waived for those with family-income of less than $40,000) and to provide dental care for all "who can't afford it." She also promised to increase funding for hospitals to put an end to "hallway medicine"—a reference to the widespread practice of treating patients in hallways due to the lack of hospital beds and staff.

For six years, from 2012 through 2017, the Ontario Liberal government slashed health care, education and other vital public services in the name of eliminating the province's annual budget deficit. During the first two years of this austerity drive, the minority Liberal government of Dalton McGuity and then Kathleen Wynne retained power only because it enjoyed the parliamentary support of none other than Horwath and her fellow NDP legislators.

Horwath's election platform also contains pledges an NDP government will introduce a universal (but not free) prescription drug or pharmacare plan, establish a mental health and addiction ministry, and launch a 10-year multi-billion dollar capital spending program to repair school buildings.

Coming from a party that has enforced right-wing, pro-business policies whenever it has held power at the provincial level, none of these commitments can be taken at face value. Underscoring the NDP's pro-big business orientation, Horwath has touted her plan to raise corporate tax rates by 1.5 percent and personal income tax rates by 1 percent for those earning more than $220,000 as a radical measure. In fact, this would not even return tax-rates for big business and the rich to the already low levels they stood when the Liberals took power from the Progressive Conservatives in 2003.

As the corporate media has observed, apart from these minimal tax hikes, the NDP's fiscal plan differs little from that proposed by the big business Liberals.

Wynne has seconded this assessment, adding that she would be willing to cooperate with the NDP in preventing Doug Ford and his Conservatives from forming government should no party win a majority on June 7.

Horwath and the NDP, meanwhile, have refused to rule out the possibility that the two parties could cooperate in a coalition or other parliamentary arrangement to block the Conservatives from office. Such an arrangement, as was seen between 2012 and 2014, would be bound up with an intensification of the assault on the working class.

Workers across Canada have a long experience with the right-wing policies of NDP provincial governments. When the party last held power in Ontario, from 1990-95, it capitulated to demands from big business that it take an axe to public spending. Under Premier Bob Rae, the NDP compelled 1 million public sector workers to take unpaid days off, introduced "workfare," and abandoned key electoral pledges, including the creation of a public auto insurance system.

Rae went on to provide further evidence of the lack of any principled differences between Canada's major bourgeois parties, when, a decade after losing power, he seamlessly transitioned into a leadership position in the federal Liberal Party.

At the federal level, the NDP has proven to be just as committed to upholding the interests of the corporate elite. Like social-democratic parties around the world, including Tony Blair's Labour Party in Britain and Gerhard Schröder's Social Democrats in Germany, the NDP moved sharply to the right in the 1980s and 1990s. Under the leadership of the late Jack Layton, the NDP ditched the remnants of its milquetoast reformist program, including dropping its nominal opposition to Canada's participation in NATO, and courted senior politicians from the big business Liberals, like former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair, who would succeed Layton as party leader .

Mulcair, an avowed admirer of British Tory Prime Minister

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Margaret Thatcher, pledged the NDP to fiscal responsibility and balanced budgets, endorsed Israel's invasion of the Gaza Strip and massacring of Palestinians during the 2014 war, and insisted on the maintenance of the low-tax, corporate-friendly environment for investors established by successive Liberal and Conservative governments over the past three decades. Since Jagmeet Singh took over from Mulcair last October, following a leadership campaign in which none of the fundamental tenets of Mulcair's leadership were called into question, he has stuck firmly to this right-wing course.

On top of its reactionary domestic policies, the NDP has been a strident advocate of Canadian imperialist aggression around the world. Under the spurious claim of defending human rights, the party rallied behind NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999 and backed Canada's leading role in the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Libya. The NDP has also strongly supported the Canadian Armed Forces' deployment to Eastern Europe as part of NATO's preparations for war against Moscow. And the social democrats have demonstrated their support for increased military spending by remaining silent on the federal Liberals' plan to hike defence spending by 70 percent over the coming decade.

The modest increase in support that the NDP is enjoying in the polls in spite of this record is in no small part due to the widespread opposition among working people to Ford, whose hard-right agenda is seen as a threat to what remains of the gains workers made in the great social struggles of the last century. Notwithstanding the despicable efforts by Liberal-aligned mouthpieces like the *Toronto Star* to blame the working class for Ford's rise so as to cover up the fact that the Liberals' anti-working class policies have produced mounting hardship and social inequality, Ford does not enjoy a mass base of support among working people. Rather, sections of the ruling elite have brought him forward with the aim of shifting politics sharply to the right.

That being said, the NDP is far from attracting mass working class support. There has been nothing comparable as yet to the broad participation in rallies and campaigning seen in the United States for Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and in Britain for Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, both of whom employed left and even socialist demagogy to redirect mounting popular disaffection with the capitalist system back into the dead-end of establishment politics.

Factions of the establishment opposed to Ford becoming premier are, in fact, encouraging the NDP's rise. Acknowledging that after 15 years of attacks on workers the Liberals' days in power are numbered, sections of the trade unions, which in past elections rallied behind the Liberals, have switched to campaigning for the NDP. In addition, the *Toronto Star* has provided Horwath and the NDP with extensive and largely favourable coverage.

Two interconnected issues are at work here. Firstly, the unions and other privileged sections of the middle class associated with NGOs and academia are concerned that Ford's assumption of power will threaten their material interests by blocking their access to the corridors of power. Both the Liberals and NDP favor "partnering" with the unions, so as to systematically use the union bureaucracy to enforce their attacks on the working class. Ford's Progressive Conservatives, on the other hand, have served notice that as part of their campaign to eliminate "government waste," they will scrap much of the province's infrastructure of well-paid corporatist union-government-management consultative committees.

Secondly, sections of the ruling elite sense that the working class is once again entering into major class struggles, as heralded by the growing number of strikes and other social protests across Canada over the past year. These sections see the strengthening of the NDP's "left" credentials as vital to block the radicalization of the working class and keep leftward-moving workers confined within establishment politics.

Illusions undoubtedly remain among sections of workers about the possibility of obtaining social improvements from an NDP government. These illusions are being consciously cultivated and encouraged by the coterie of pseudo-left groups that operate inside the NDP, like Fightback and Socialist Action, or on its periphery, like the International Socialists.

In addition, prominent "radical" figures have stepped forward to bolster the NDP's authority. The latest example of this was an article in the *Star* co-authored by the well-known author and "progressive" activist Naomi Klein. The article, entitled "We can stop Trumpism coming to Canada," read like an extended election ad for the New Democrats. "We are convinced," it proclaimed, "that now is the time for everyone who is committed to social justice to throw down to help elect the NDP—and that includes people like us who have never been NDP members and usually stay away from parliamentary politics."

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