“I’m not Bob Rae”

Horwath seeks to disingenuously disassociate Canada’s NDP from its right-wing record

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In campaigning for today’s Ontario election, provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Andrea Horwath has repeatedly fielded questions about her attitude to the Bob Rae-led NDP government—the last, and only ever, NDP government in Canada’s most populous province.

“This is not the 1990s and I’m certainly not Bob Rae” has been Horwath’s stock, vapid reply. Sometimes she has gone on to insinuate that Rae, who became a leading light in the federal Liberal Party a decade after the Ontario NDP fell from office, was never a “true” social democrat.

Horwath’s eagerness to distance herself from Premier Rae, whose name for many workers became synonymous with betrayal, and the 1990–1995 Ontario NDP government is entirely understandable. It is also entirely disingenuous.

Elected on a pledge to shield working people from a gathering economic storm, the Rae NDP government quickly succumbed to big business’ demands that it junk its promises of timid reform and turn on the working class. It invoked rising joblessness and mounting provincial budget deficits to justify slashing social services, imposing onerous tax hikes, and cutting the wages of one million public sector workers.

This anti-working class offensive was capped off with denunciations of “welfare cheats” and a pilot “workfare” program. It paved the way for the coming to power in June 1995 of a Conservative government under Mike Harris committed to a “Common Sense Revolution”—a Reagan-Thatcher style assault on public services, worker rights and welfare recipients that has left Canada a far more unequal and meaner society.

It is now more than two decades since the fall of the Rae government, but—as Horwath’s “I’m not Bob Rae” tagline exemplifies—Canada’s social democrats haven’t bothered to offer any substantive critique of how and why the ostensible “party of working people” proved to be a ruthless enforcer of capitalist austerity.

Indeed, the NDP and their trade union allies have only lurched further right during the past 23 years. The social democrats have repeatedly backed Canada’s involvement in US-led imperialist wars and military-strategic offensives, including those currently targeting Russia and China. Whenever they have held provincial office, from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, they have imposed austerity. They have also repeatedly formed or pursued alliances with the big business Liberals and, fittingly, expunged any mention of socialism from the NDP constitution.

Horwath's suggestion that the Rae NDP government’s rightwing policies were due to it being led by a party outlier who later showed his true colours by jumping ship to the Liberals is absurd.

Firstly, Rae was a quintessential social democrat, who, like Horwath, long enjoyed close ties to the trade union bureaucracy. It was Canadian Auto Workers President Bob White, along with other senior labour bureaucrats, who persuaded Rae to give up a career on the NDP frontbench in Ottawa to take up the reins of the Ontario NDP.

Secondly, and more importantly, there was no significant opposition among the NDP legislators at Queen’s Park to the policies of the Rae government. Not to its role in imposing job and wage cuts through various government-engineered private sector “restructuring” plans. Nor to its “social contract,” which imposed a three-year wage-freeze on provincial public sector workers and forced all but the lowest-paid to accept a further five percent wage cut in the form of unpaid days-off work, the so-called Rae Days.

The Steelworkers (USW), Communication, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP), the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and most other private sector unions publicly backed the NDP government and its “social contract” to the end.

As for the public sector unions, their opposition, such as it was, was a thoroughly cynical maneuver, motivated by fear that mounting working class opposition would escape their control. Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)

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President Judy Darcy, a former Maoist, initially backed the idea of a "social contract," saying her union would be willing to support a wage-restraint agreement like that negotiated between the BC NDP government and the unions. But Rae, acting at the behest of the credit-rating agencies and the financial elite, insisted on imposing much steeper cuts, including the elimination of thousands of jobs.

While Horwath declaims "I am not Bob Rae," she has already demonstrated that she is fashioned from the very same mold.

With Horwath at the helm, the NDP propped up a minority Ontario Liberal government for two-and-a-half years ending in May 2014. And did so, while the Liberals imposed sweeping social spending cuts and criminalized teacher job-action so as to ram through wage and benefit cuts. So desperate were Horwath and her fellow social democrats to curry favour with big business, that their campaign in the subsequent June 2014 Ontario election was widely acknowledged to have been to the right of that of the pro-austerity Liberals.

Horwath's current campaign is little different. Promises of small social spending increases and the rolling back of corporate tax rates to where they stood when Kathleen Wynne became premier in 2013 are being touted as "radical" measures.

The social democrats, as illustrated by the *Toronto Star*'s endorsement of an NDP-led Ontario government, have won the backing of a significant faction of the ruling class. This faction fears a Conservative government under the rightwing populist Doug Ford will become a lightning rod for social opposition; especially, as recent months have seen a resurgence of class struggle in Canada, the US, and internationally. It calculates the assault on the social rights of the working class can best be advanced by a government that employs "left" rhetoric to conceal its reactionary agenda and works in close cooperation with the unions to smother popular opposition.

Social democracy has been a vital prop of capitalist rule for more than a century, ever since the leading parties of the Second or Socialist International supported their respective capitalist governments in the First World War. It has used saccharine phrases, piece-meal reforms and, when these failed, state repression to politically suppress the working class, dragoon it into imperialist wars, and otherwise defend the capitalist order.

During the post-Second World War capitalist boom, the various Socialist and Labour parties were closely identified with the development and expansion of the welfare state, a series of social provisions meant to protect working people from cradle to grave from the ravages of capitalism. For a time, this reform policy enjoyed the support of the bourgeoisie, which in the wake of the Great Depression and the second imperialist world war in a generation feared a repetition of the October 1917 Russian Revolution

However, with the collapse of the boom in the early 1970s and the globalization of capitalist production, the objective basis for the social democrats' pro-capitalist national-reform program collapsed. Responding to the bourgeoisie's repudiation of class compromise, social democrats the world over shredded their reformist platforms and took a wrecking ball to the public and social services they had previously held up as proof capitalism could be humanized.

From France's Francois Mitterrand, through Australia's Bob Hawke and Paul Keating to Britain's Tony Blair and Germany's Gerhard Schroeder, Bob Rae-type figures have headed social democratic governments whenever and wherever they have come to power since the early 1980s.

This rightward march has been endorsed and encouraged by the social democrats' traditional allies, the trade union bureaucracy. Incapable of charting a progressive response to globalization, the nationally-based unions have responded to the intensification of class conflict by turning toward corporatism and serving as appendages of corporate management and the state in the ruling-class drive to increase profits through job and wage cuts and speed-up.

In this context, Horwath's quip that "this is not 1990" bears careful consideration. Beset by its greatest and most prolonged crisis since the Great Depression, world capitalism is wracked by economic imbalances, trade war and incendiary great power conflicts.

The universal response of the capitalist elites to this crisis is an offensive against what remains of the social rights of the working class, rearmament and militarist violence, and the stoking of social reaction, including anti-immigrant chauvinism.

Should Horwath and the NDP come to power after today's vote, they will be compelled by their capitalist masters to lash out against the working class just as surely as Rae and the NDP were a generation ago.

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