

Canada: The unions' suppression of the 1995-97 anti-Harris movement: Political lessons for today

Part 4: The SEP, the unions and the pseudo-left

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This is the final part of a four-part series. The first part can be accessed [here](#), the second [here](#) and the third [here](#).

Two decades on from the mass movement against the Harris government, the pseudo-left is mounting a concerted political campaign to outright deny, or at the very least minimize, the objective significance of the unions' scuttling of the working-class opposition to the Conservatives' class-war assault.

For Gindin, the anti-Harris movement was not suppressed, but simply "ran out of steam." The Socialist Project leader claims this was due to workers' unwillingness to mount a radical struggle, on the one hand, and the movement's success in forcing Harris to "blunt his agenda," on the other.

All this is hogwash. The record shows that workers were not only ready to fight; as the movement grew, they increasingly demanded far more radical measures than the timid and harmless city-wide "days of action" that the union bureaucracy sanctioned with the aim of dissipating workers' anger.

Significantly, in his more than five-thousand-word account of the "great" and "remarkable" anti-Harris "mobilizations," Gindin makes no mention whatsoever of the Oct.-Nov. 1997 province-wide teachers' strike. As we documented in the previous part, the two-week, illegal strike was explicitly political; won widespread popular support, throwing the government into severe crisis; and could have served as the starting point for a working-class industrial and political mobilization aimed at bringing down the Tory government.

Gindin's claim the movement "ran out of steam" is nothing more than a transparent attempt to cover up the unions' role in sabotaging the anti-Harris movement, whose development and logic posed the need for a political general strike, mobilizing the entire working class, with the aim of ousting the right-wing Harris government and developing a cross-Canada working-class counter-offensive against the big business-state attack on workers' social rights.

The SEP's intervention in the anti-Harris movement

This was the program fought for by the Socialist Equality Party of Canada (and its predecessor, the International Workers Party). The SEP intervened in the 1995-97 anti-Tory movement to urge workers to seize the leadership of the opposition movement from the union bureaucrats and transform it into a truly independent political movement of the working

class.

"The (SEP) warns workers to beware the leadership of the Ontario Federation of Labour," declared a statement, "To Fight the Harris Cuts, Workers Need a Socialist Strategy," issued shortly after the first Day of Action in London, on December 11, 1995. "The OFL bureaucrats," continued the statement, "are seeking to seize control of the opposition to the Tories Common Sense Revolution in order to politically neuter it. ... If workers cede the leadership of this movement to the OFL and NDP leaders it will be contained and defeated, just as the Operation Solidarity movement in BC in 1983 and the movement against Rae's 'social contract' were defeated."

The SEP explained that past social gains could only be defended to the extent that the working class transcended the narrow framework of collective bargaining and protests to the big business politicians and organized itself as an independent political force, advancing its own program to reorganize economic life in the interests of working people through the establishment of a workers' government.

"All the struggles against the Tory cuts, their 'reforms' of social programs and the downsizing of the public sector must be brought together in a political struggle aimed at bringing down the Harris regime and building a movement to replace it with a government democratically controlled by and serving the interests of working people," explained an SEP statement distributed in the thousands to a rally of teachers and their supporters, Nov. 8, 1997.

The SEP warned against the politics of the International Socialists, the Canadian sister organization of the US-based ISO, and the other middle-class left groups, which all sought to uphold the political authority of the unions and NDP, insisting that workers and youth should expend their energies in seeking to pressure them to the left. In a 1996 statement we noted: "As to the political alternative to the Tories, these organizations either remain silent or join with the unions in advocating the return of an NDP government."

These warnings were to prove prophetic. After betraying the anti-Harris movement, the unions, led by the CAW (now Unifor), forged a close working relationship with the big business Liberals that lasted two decades and helped elect and re-elect Liberal governments under Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne. These governments not only left in place the key tenets of Harris' Common Sense Revolution, they intensified the assault on the working class, with round after round of austerity, privatizations, and tax cuts for big business. But unlike Harris, the Liberals fostered corporatist collaboration with the union bureaucracy, establishing a network of formal and informal union-government-business partnerships and consultations. With the unions' full support, the NDP

propped up a minority Liberal government between 2012 and 2014 as it implemented sweeping social spending cuts and criminalized teacher job action to force through cuts in real wages.

The unions' systematic suppression of the class struggle and the incessant claims, amplified by their pseudo-left cheerleaders, that the Liberals represented a "progressive" alternative to the Harper Conservative government and the Ontario Tories, created conditions in which the Trump wannabe, Doug Ford, could exploit the anger and frustration of working people over declining incomes and mounting economic insecurity to win office last June.

The pseudo-left defenders of the unions

Gindin's apologia for the trade unions only puts more crudely the position of the entire pseudo-left, including Fightback and the International Socialists (IS): The popular opposition to Ford's social counter-revolution must be confined—or more rightly condemned to die—within the framework of a union-led protest movement, restricted organizationally and politically to Ontario, and aimed at pressuring Ford to reverse course, and failing that at electing a "progressive" capitalist government.

In contradistinction to Gindin, Fightback—the Canadian affiliate of the misnamed International Marxist Tendency—does grudgingly acknowledge that the unions shut down the anti-Harris movement. However, it presents this as a unique episode, not as part of a chain of betrayals that has been replicated around the world for decades, and is bound up with fundamental changes in class relations and the character of the unions as organizations rooted in the acceptance of capitalist property relations and the nation-state.

According to Fightback, the pro-capitalist unions can be "transformed" into fighting organizations for the working class if enough pressure is applied from below. "The labour movement needs to wake up," declaimed Fightback in its initial response to Ford's election. "We need union leaders who will lead a militant fight against Ford," declared a more recent Fightback article. "Discussions need to be had at all locals, with the ability of all members to have their opinions heard, on how we can mobilize to topple this rotten government."

All of their radical bluster notwithstanding, Fightback, like Gindin, insists that the unions' authority over the working class must be maintained. Moreover, Fightback's talk of "toppling this rotten government" begs the question of what will replace it. For these fully paid-up members of the NDP, the answer is clear: Fightback supports the bringing to power of a union-backed NDP government. They claim, as does IS, that such a government, led by a party that has backed every Canadian imperialist war since the bombing of Yugoslavia and has enforced vicious austerity measures whenever it has held power at the provincial level, will respond to pressure from "the streets" by turning to the "left."

But the treachery of the OFL during the anti-austerity mobilizations, and the sharp shift to the right by the unions and NDP in the period since, were not the result of the absence of "militant" leaders, or insufficient pressure on the unions and NDP from below. The experience of Ontario workers is, in its essentials, common to workers all over the world.

Everywhere, those organizations, be they trade unions, social-democratic or Stalinist "Communist" parties, that advocated a reform program based on the acceptance of the economic foundations of capitalism have emerged as enforcers of wage, job and public spending cuts. Blair's Labour Party in Britain, Jospin's Socialist Party in France, and Schröder's Social Democrats in Germany launched unprecedented

attacks on the working class and social services, combined with war-mongering and militarism abroad. In Greece, the pseudo-left Syriza government, brought to power in January 2015 on the basis of false claims to oppose austerity, turned viciously against the working class and imposed even more radical social spending cuts than its conservative and social-democratic predecessors.

As for the unions, from the British TUC, through France's state and employer-financed unions, to the American AFL-CIO, they have lost millions of members, having assisted employers and governments of all political stripes in implementing capitalist austerity.

Once more on the record of the unions and NDP

In Canada, in the two decades since the anti-Harris movement, the unions and their traditional political allies in the NDP have moved sharply further right.

The alliance the unions formed with the Ontario Liberals was soon extended to the federal level.

The unions and NDP responded to the 2008 global financial crash by seeking to bring to power a Liberal-led coalition government in Ottawa committed to waging war in Afghanistan through 2011, implementing \$50 billion in corporate tax cuts, and making "fiscal responsibility" its first priority.

In the months and years that followed, the unions imposed mass layoffs, and wage and pension cuts on their members. As part of the 2009 auto industry "bailout," the CAW connived with the Harper Conservative and McGuinty Liberal governments to impose two-tier wages and across-the-board wage and benefit cuts of more than \$20 per hour, per worker at the Canadian plants of the Detroit Three.

When a genuine mass movement against austerity erupted in Quebec with the 2012 student strike, the unions worked to shut it down and politically harness it to the big business Parti Quebecois, under the slogan, "From the streets to the ballot box." As for the NDP, which the year before had swept the polls in Quebec, it refused to even nominally support the striking students or denounce the vicious police repression to which they were subjected.

The unions and their "Anybody but Conservative" campaign played a significant role in the election of Justin Trudeau's Liberals in October 2015. In the three years since, the unions have developed a close working partnership with the government as epitomized by the role Canadian Labour Congress President Hassan Yussuff and Unifor President Jerry Dias played in the NAFTA renegotiation.

Led by Yussuff and Dias, the union bureaucracy has embraced the new US-Mexico-Canada trade pact. USMCA forges a more explicitly protectionist North American trade bloc so as to serve as a platform for US and Canadian imperialism to more aggressively advance their interests on the world stage, especially against China. The unions are fully on board with this reactionary agenda, having made no criticism of the Trudeau government's plans to hike military spending by 70 percent over the next decade.

And yet according to Gindin, Fightback, IS, et al. these are the organizations that the working class must look to and count on to lead the opposition to the Ford government!

The transformation of the traditional bureaucratic labor organizations into enforcers of capitalist austerity is fundamentally not a product of personal corruption, but rather the outcome of profound changes in the structure of capitalism. These organizations' basic orientation—the protection of national industry and the national labor market—has been undermined by the globalization of production and the unprecedented

mobility of capital. Workers can effectively answer globally organized capital only insofar as they consciously organize their struggles on the basis of an internationalist strategy and reject the subordination of workers' interests to the imperatives of the capitalist market.

This has been underscored over the past year with the reemergence of open class struggle around the globe. Wherever workers have sought to fight back, whether it has been teachers in the United States, metalworkers in Germany, railway workers in France, or autoworkers in Eastern Europe, they have come into bitter conflict with the trade union bureaucracy. This is an expression of the objective irreconcilability between workers' interests and those of the union bureaucrats, who represent a pro-capitalist, pro-war section of the upper-middle class whose wealth and privileges are tied by a thousand threads to the maintenance of capitalist exploitation. This fundamental antagonism between the unions and the working class raises with tremendous urgency the need for workers to establish their own organizations of struggle if they are to overturn the attacks of the past four decades.

With Ford's frontal assault on the working class already in full swing, working people urgently need to draw the lessons of the anti-Harris movement and political developments across Canada and internationally over the past four decades. If the decimation of what remains of public services and welfare provisions is to be stopped, workers must abandon any illusions in the possibility of advancing their interests by pressuring the union bureaucracy and NDP to the "left." As has been shown time and again, these organizations respond to an upsurge in working class struggle not by moving "left," but by lining up squarely behind the big business ruling elite and the capitalist state, i.e. by smothering and betraying working class struggles, and conniving in job cuts, austerity measures, and privatizations.

Instead, the working class must constitute itself as an independent political force. This can be accomplished only through the establishment of independent action committees in workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods across Ontario to prepare protests and strikes in opposition to the Ford government's right-wing agenda. These committees must link up the struggles of each section of the working class with the aim of organizing a general strike to bring down Ford and bringing to power a workers' government committed to socialist policies.

Such a struggle is above all a political fight. To carry it out, workers need their own party—the Socialist Equality Party—to lead it in the class battles on the immediate agenda. The SEP insists that workers in Ontario cannot take a single step forward by confining the struggle against Ford to a provincial strategy. Like Harris in the 1990s, Ford is merely the expression of a broader turn to the right by the political elite across Canada and internationally under conditions of a deepening crisis of global capitalism. To oppose this, and the assault on jobs and public services, attacks on democratic rights, trade war and militarism, workers in Ontario must unite their struggles with the working class throughout Canada, in the United States, and around the world on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program.



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