

Canada's NDP spouts “progressive” rhetoric while planning to prop up minority Liberal government

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The New Democratic Party's campaign for Canada's October 21 federal election is focused on duping voters with a limited series of “progressive” policy pledges. The proposed policies are not only utterly inadequate to meet the social crisis confronting working people, but given the NDP's subservience to big business and the scope of the global capitalist crisis, it will not realize or even genuinely fight for them.

Having strained over the previous four years to distinguish itself from the big business Liberals, Canada's social-democratic party entered the election campaign in disarray, with little more than 10 percent support in opinion polls.

However, there are indications that NDP leader Jagmeet Singh's campaign rhetoric, and the NDP's promises of a national pharmacare program and hikes in corporate and capital gains taxes are finding traction among a section of the electorate, especially young people. Singh has denounced the Liberals and Conservatives for pandering to the “rich” and their “corporate friends,” and argued the economy is “rigged” in favour of big business.

The disingenuous and cynical character of such rhetoric is highlighted by the NDP's plans to prop up a Trudeau minority Liberal government. With polls suggesting that the Liberals will win the most parliamentary seats, but fall short of a parliamentary majority, Singh announced Thursday the six “urgent priorities” that the NDP will ask the Liberals “to take very seriously” in any post-election negotiations. Revealingly, most of the vaguely-worded “priorities,” including creation of a national pharmacare plan, “investments in housing” reducing carbon emissions, and “reducing cellphone bills,” are all things Trudeau's Liberals already claim to favour.

The title of the NDP's election program, “A New Deal for the People” sums up its class basis and orientation. A party of trade union bureaucrats, well-heeled professionals, and small-business owners, the NDP is an integral part of the “liberal” wing of the North American bourgeoisie. This is exemplified by its cribbing of much of the rhetoric and policy prescriptions of the so-called progressive wing of the Democratic Party, one of US imperialism's two main parties.

Lifted from Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the call for a “new deal,” is a reference to the program of social reforms, implemented by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the midst of the Great Depression, to shield American capitalism from a revolutionary upsurge from below and prepare it for the second imperialist world war. Like Ocasio-Cortez's efforts to provide the Democrats with “progressive” credentials, the NDP is employing “left” rhetoric to trap leftward moving workers and young people

within the political establishment, thereby facilitating the ruling elite's pursuit of austerity, rearmament and war.

The NDP's repeated references to “the people” underlines its embrace of a populist language not all that dissimilar from the explicitly right-wing fare offered up by the likes of Maxime Bernier's People's Party in Canada or Marine le Pen's National Rally in France. While the NDP has always been a pro-capitalist party, its abandonment of references to the working class or even “working people” reflects a further shift to the right and its increasing preoccupation with gender, race and other forms of identity politics, through which various petty-bourgeois layers seek to gain greater access to positions of power and wealth.

That the NDP is a prop and defender of Canadian imperialism is epitomized by its deafening silence on the significant role Canada is playing in the major US military-strategic offensives—against China, Russia and in the Middle East—and Trudeau's decision to hike military spending by over 70 percent by 2026.

Full-throated support for Canadian rearmament

The NDP's support for the Liberals' plans to spend tens of billions on new fleets of warplanes and battleships is spelled out in its election platform. The platform complains about delays in their procurement and bluntly declares, “[A]fter decades of Liberal and Conservative cuts and mismanagement, our military has been left with outdated equipment, inadequate support, and an unclear strategic mandate ... A New Democratic government will make sure that our troops have the equipment, training, and support they need to do the difficult and dangerous work we ask them to undertake.”

The NDP's support for the military goes hand in hand with its embrace of economic protectionism and nationalism. The NDP declares in its platform a desire to support a “made in Canada” auto industry and “Canadian manufacturing jobs,” while advocating “fair trade agreements,” i.e., rejection of free trade from the same nationalist standpoint as Trump and his “America First” allies. The New Democrats have joined in the anti-China campaign supported by the majority of the ruling elite, declaring their support for banning the Chinese tech giant Huawei from Canada's 5-G network.

While Singh tries to muster votes with talk of a \$15 per hour federal minimum wage, better protections for temporary workers, and a 1

percent wealth tax on those with fortunes in excess of \$20 million, he, like his NDP predecessors, is eager to offer support to a Liberal minority government.

Whenever the issue of supporting a Trudeau minority government has been raised, Singh has chosen his words carefully, stressing that he will never lend support to Andrew Scheer's Conservatives. Singh has made great play of the Green Party's refusal to explicitly rule out propping up the Tories, denouncing Green leader Elizabeth May for her willingness to facilitate Scheer becoming prime minister.

Singh's appeal for a de facto coalition with what has long been the Canadian ruling elite's preferred party of government is in keeping with the NDP's traditions as a nationalist, pro-capitalist party, allied with the trade union bureaucracy. Time and again, Canada's social democrats have stepped in to provide a parliamentary majority for Liberal governments from those led by Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau in the 1960s and 1970s to that headed by Paul Martin from 2004 to 2006.

What happened the last time the NDP backed a Liberal minority government? From 2012 to 2014, the Ontario NDP propped up provincial Liberal governments led by Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne, which imposed a series of austerity budgets. Spending on healthcare, education, and social services was gutted; wages for teachers, nurses, and other public service workers were cut; and taxes held at all-time lows for the corporations and super-rich. As an MPP in Ontario's legislature, Singh voted along with his fellow New Democrats to facilitate these measures.

No less revealing are the circumstances surrounding the last time the NDP formally agreed to prop up a federal Liberal-led government. In late 2008, in response to the eruption of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression, the NDP agreed to be the junior partner in a coalition government expressly committed to implementing \$50 billion in corporate tax cuts, waging war in Afghanistan through 2011, and making "fiscal responsibility" the government's guiding budgetary principle. This deal was aborted after Stephen Harper's Tories prorogued parliament in an anti-democratic constitutional coup to prevent the opposition from toppling his government.

When the NDP emerged as the Official Opposition after the 2011 election, it sought to prove to the ruling elite that it was ready to assume reins of government by shifting still further right. Under former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair, it waged a "Harper lite" election campaign in 2015, promising balanced budgets and defence spending hikes.

Canada's ruling elite would undoubtedly prefer the current election campaign to result in a majority government, either under the Liberals or Conservatives. Recent months have been dominated by mounting frustration in the corporate media and political establishment at Trudeau's inability to confront myriad crises bearing down on Canadian imperialism, from the breakdown of multilateral institutions to the rise of China, mounting tensions between US and European imperialism, and the resurgence of the class struggle internationally. The Canadian bourgeoisie wants a strong government, as insulated as possible from public pressure, to suppress working class struggles at home while arming the military to the teeth to prosecute Canadian imperialist interests on the global stage.

However, a Liberal minority government propped up by the NDP, or a Liberal-NDP coalition, would be no less hostile to the interests of the working class and no less an instrument of big business. Continuing on from the first four years of Justin Trudeau's

government, a governing combination of these two parties, whatever its precise form, would use "progressive" rhetoric to mask its pursuit of capitalist austerity, attacks on democratic rights at home, rearmament and an ever-closer military-strategic partnership with Washington.

Moreover, Liberal-NDP cooperation would rest heavily on the support of the trade unions, which have proven time and again their readiness to enforce wage and budget cuts on the workers they claim to represent. Just last week, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) accepted Ontario Premier Doug Ford's three-year 1 percent annual pay "increase" for school support staff, in what amounts to—in real terms—a pay cut, as part of a deal to sabotage a strike by 55,000 workers against the Ford government's multi-billion dollar austerity program. This sellout sets a precedent for the government to cut the wages of 1 million public sector workers, and prevent the eruption of a mass working class movement against Ford under conditions in which 250,000 teachers and education staff are working without a contract. Three days after CUPE's betrayal, Singh was a featured speaker at the union's convention.

The ruling elite is well aware of the valuable services the unions and NDP could render them under conditions of mounting crisis. This explains why Singh has generally enjoyed favourable media coverage during the current campaign. His response to the Trudeau "blackface scandal" was praised as "emotional," "warm-hearted," and "statesman-like" from outlets ranging from Reuters to the pseudo-left publications of Fightback and the International Socialists.

Singh's use of the scandal to provide a reputed "teaching moment" on racism was in fact entirely within the framework of establishment politics. Racism and anti-immigrant chauvinism were not exposed as social maladies deliberately employed by the ruling elite to divide the working class. Indeed, all that this capitalist politician on-the-make had to offer in the way of an antidote to racism was his vapid campaign slogan, inspired by Barack Obama and the late NDP leader Jack Layton—"Love and Courage."



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