Canada: NDP, unions eager to prop up Trudeau Liberal government

Keith Jones
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The New Democratic Party (NDP) and the trade unions have warmly welcomed the results of Monday's federal election, which saw Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his big-business Liberal Party returned to power, but without a parliamentary majority.

The social-democratic politicians and their union allies intend to prop up the Liberals—long the ruling class's preferred party of national government—under the guise of providing Canadians with "progressive" government and halting the hard-right Conservatives' accession to power.

Unifor, the country's largest industrial union, spearheaded the unions' campaign to re-elect the Trudeau government, while backing New Democrat candidates in select ridings. In a press release Tuesday, it boasted to have led a "successful campaign to Stop (Conservative leader Andrew) Scheer;" then championed a Liberal-NDP government alliance with the cynical claim that voters had "delivered an answer on how" Canada will address the "big questions"—"we'll do it together."

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the largest public sector union, opposed the "strategic voting" campaign mounted by Unifor, the Canadian Labour Congress, and numerous other unions, advocating instead the union bureaucracy's traditional policy of electoral support for the NDP.

But it was no less emphatic in welcoming the opportunity for the NDP to work with Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government. "Holding the balance of power"—i.e. the ability to guarantee the adoption of Liberal legislation, the NDP, enthused CUPE, can keep "the Liberals on their toes" and "make the sure that the new government respects its promises."

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, for his part, told a press conference Tuesday that "everything is on the table" in coming negotiations with the Liberals. This was meant as a signal that the NDP is not just eager to work with the Liberals in crafting legislation and to sustain them in key votes. It is ready to consider joining a Liberal-led coalition or entering into a confidence-and-supply agreement, guaranteeing Trudeau the NDP's support for an extended period.

In the final days of the campaign, Singh repeatedly suggested his party could serve as the Liberals' junior partner in a coalition government, along the lines of the coalition agreement the two parties struck in 2008. That agreement collapsed after Conservative Prime Minster Stephen Harper shut down parliament to prevent the opposition voting him out of office.

In Monday's election, the NDP saw its parliamentary caucus reduced from 42 to 24 and its share of the vote cut by 4 percentage points or more than one-fifth. In Quebec and Ontario, which together account for more than 60 percent of Canada's population, the NDP won 1 and 6 seats respectively.

Yet Singh was in a decidedly upbeat mood Tuesday.

The social democratic politicians are salivating at the prospect of a minority parliament giving them greater access to power and influence.

They and their trade union allies will use whatever legislative crumbs the Liberals offer them to provide "progressive" colours" to a right-wing government. As in Trudeau's first term, a Liberal government propped up by the NDP and the unions will use hollow progressive rhetoric and identity politics as a smokescreen for maintaining austerity social spending and ultra-low taxes for big business and the rich, while pursuing rearmament, and further integrating Canada into Washington's military-strategic offensives, including against Russia and China.

Significantly, the Liberal government's aggressive military deployments, support for the made-in-USA regime-change drive in Venezuela and plans to spend tens of billions on equipping Canada's military with new fleets of battleship and warplanes did not figure in the NDP election campaign.

If there were any doubt that the NDP's silence bespeaks consent, it is removed by the party's platform for the 2019 election. It denounces "decades of Liberal and Conservative cuts" to "our military," and gives full-throated support to

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naval and “fighter jet procurement” (see: NDP advocates spending tens of billions on Canada’s military).

At his Tuesday press conference Singh again highlighted the six “key” NDP “priorities” that he outlined in the final days of the campaign with the aim of laying the groundwork for post-election negotiations with the Liberals.

These “priorities”—which include a national pharmacare program, measures to address climate change, more social housing, and increased taxation of the wealthy—are not demands, just things that the social democrats want to discuss “action on” with the Liberals. As even the corporate media has noted, all dovetail with vaguely worded Liberal promises and areas of concern.

Were these paltry reforms enacted in full, it would do next to nothing to reverse the erosion in the social position of the working class produced by the four-decade-long class war mounted by big business and their hirelings in government.

But under conditions of global capitalist crisis, the Liberals have no intention of making anything more than token steps to enact the NDP’s “priorities,” and the social democrats and their union allies have no intention of fighting for them.

At his post-election press conference, Singh sought to reassure his prospective Liberal coalition partners and big business that the social democrats well understand their role. He stressed that the NDP would act “responsibly” and that it “recognized” the election results—i.e. that as the fourth party in parliament the NDP could not expect much in the way of Liberal “concessions.”

Given the parliamentary arithmetic, it was always highly unlikely Trudeau and his Liberals would take up the NDP’s offer of a formal coalition.

However, Trudeau’s emphatic rejection of a “formal” or “informal” coalition with the NDP yesterday, at his first post-election press conference, was politically significant.

The prime minster clearly wanted to address big-business concerns about ceding a share of power and influence to the NDP, no matter the latter’s long and infamous record of imposing social spending cuts and breaking strikes whenever it has formed provincial government. In the election’s aftermath, the corporate media has been churning out articles claiming the Liberals will recklessly increase social spending and the federal deficit in order to gain the NDP’s backing. The media has also demanded that Trudeau quell an incipient “national unity” crisis by doing more to push through oil pipelines.

In an aggressive speech to the provincial legislature Tuesday, Alberta United Conservative Party Premier Jason Kenney repeated his vitriolic complaints against Ottawa for not doing enough to support Western Canada’s energy industry and demanded Trudeau not form a government alliance with the NDP, the Greens or the Bloc Quebecois, citing their opposition to the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion.

At yesterday’s press conference, Trudeau reiterated that the pipeline is in the “national interest” and insisted his government would not brook any delay in its construction.

As the Liberals are just 13 seats short of a majority, they need the support of only one of the three officially recognized opposition parties—the NDP, BQ, or Conservatives—on any given parliamentary vote.

Although Trudeau ruled out any formal or “informal” coalition with the NDP, the social democrats are in reality his preferred parliamentary partner; and, despite his claims to the contrary, the Liberal government is almost certain to be in a de facto alliance with the NDP for as long as the new parliament survives.

While the Liberals could occasionally make parliamentary deals with Bloc Quebecois, this pro-Quebec independence party has traditionally been much more ready to align with the Conservatives, the party historically associated with Anglo-chauvinism and since the Second World with “provincial rights.”

By leaning on the NDP and the unions, the Liberals will be able to burnish their bogus claims that they represent a progressive alternative to Conservatives, the better to advance the agenda of the ruling class, while using their unions and social democratic “partners” to contain and suppress working-class opposition.

This was precisely the role the unions and NDP played between 2011 and 2014 in Ontario. In the name of stopping Hudak and his Tories from coming to power, they propped up minority Liberal governments led by Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne that slashed corporate taxes and social spending and used strikebreaking legislation to impose wage cuts on teachers.

The de facto Liberal-NDP alliance in Ottawa will not preclude the Liberals joining forces with the Conservatives to push through right-wing measures deemed by the bourgeoisie to be of urgent “national interest,” such as the renegotiated NAFTA agreement. While the new NAFTA is a more explicit US-led anti-China trade war bloc, the NDP opposes it for not being sufficiently protectionist.

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