

Canada's trade unions and NDP rush to the rescue of the big-business Liberal government

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23 October 2020

Justin Trudeau's minority Liberal government held on to power in a confidence vote Wednesday, thanks to the votes of the 24 MPs from the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP).

Events of recent weeks, including the October 6 vote on the government's Throne Speech, have shown clearly that Canada's ruling elite is relying on a de facto coalition between the NDP, the trade unions, and the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberals, to impose its homicidal drive to keep the economy "open" amid a resurgent COVID-19 pandemic, press forward with rearmament, and otherwise step up attacks on the working class.

In a political powerplay, Trudeau chose to declare a vote on a motion from the Official Opposition Conservatives to establish a parliamentary "anti-corruption" committee a matter of "confidence," meaning the government would have fallen if the motion had passed. The committee would have had a very broad mandate to investigate the Trudeau government's role in the WE Charity scandal and other alleged instances of government corruption.

It also would have been empowered to investigate Trudeau's August 18 decision to prorogue parliament for five weeks. This anti-democratic action short-circuited earlier opposition efforts to investigate the government's awarding of a contract worth more than \$900 million for managing a student "volunteer" program to WE, a charity with close ties to Trudeau, his family and the Liberal Party more broadly.

The revelation that WE received this lucrative deal without any competitive bidding process forced the cancellation of the contract and led to a series of damaging exposures that forced WE to close down its Canadian operations. (See "Canada's Liberal government shaken by WE Charity scandal") The scandal also played a role in the ouster of Finance Minister Bill Morneau and his replacement by the deputy prime minister and leading Liberal war-hawk Chrystia Freeland.

While the WE scandal provided yet another exposure of the Liberals' bogus "progressive" credentials, the reality is that it did no more than lift the curtain on how bourgeois politics operates on a daily basis. Federal and provincial governments of all political stripes enjoy a symbiotic relationship with the corporate and financial elite, which dictate government policy. It is thus the height of political cynicism for the Tories to posture as crusaders against "corruption," especially when one recalls that the Harper government handed billions to the financial oligarchy through tax cuts and the outsourcing of public services to private enterprise.

The government's immediate aim in declaring Wednesday's vote a matter of confidence was to ensure that the opposition, especially the Conservatives, didn't get further grist, whether real or concocted, for their campaign to paint Trudeau and his Liberals as "corrupt."

However, Trudeau's main goal in pushing for the confidence vote was to test and further strengthen his government's de facto coalition with the trade unions and the NDP. He and his advisers are well aware that they will encounter growing working-class opposition to their push to keep workers on the job amidst a resurgent pandemic so as to boost big business profits and reduce state debt. They calculated that if the NDP was not prepared to toe the line on the WE scandal, there was no point in continuing with a minority government that would not even be in a position to control affairs in parliament, let alone carry through the unpopular measures demanded by big business.

The Liberals need not have worried. Fully embracing the bourgeois media's portrayal of the confidence vote as simply an opportunist attempt by Trudeau to trigger an election that polls suggest could give the Liberals a parliamentary majority, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh postured at a press conference as a workers' friend who would ensure the Liberals stayed focused on "helping people" rather than an "unnecessary" election.

This political theatre was aimed at concealing the fact that for the second time in less than a month, Singh's NDP had come to the government's rescue in a parliamentary confidence vote. The first, on the government's throne speech, gave the NDP's stamp of approval to the federal government's reckless back-to-work campaigns and its longer-term plans to offer tax breaks and other incentives to "green" corporations, and to spend tens of billions of dollars on procuring new fleets of warships and fighter jets.

The NDP's support for the Liberals is the parliamentary expression of an anti-worker corporatist alliance between the trade unions, big business and federal and provincial governments of all political stripes to advance the interests of Canadian capitalism.

For decades the unions have suppressed the class struggle and integrated themselves ever more deeply into corporate management and the state. But their corporatist alliance with the ruling class has reached a qualitatively new level during the past five years of the Trudeau government, and particularly since last March when the COVID-pandemic triggered the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression.

The unions and the social-democratic NDP politicians fully

supported the government's bailout, to the tune of more than \$600 billion, of the financial oligarchy, while workers and their families were placed on rations under the makeshift Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). The Liberals, unions and NDP then collaborated in implementing a back-to-work, back-to-school drive that has resulted in a "second wave" of the pandemic that threatens to claim thousands more lives.

These ruinous policies have further deepened social inequality, with Canada's richest 20 billionaires gaining \$37 billion since the outbreak of the pandemic, while poverty and social distress soar.

The trade unions and their NDP allies seek to suppress all working-class opposition with fraudulent propaganda about the worker-friendly, "progressive" Trudeau government—the same government that has hiked military spending by over 70 percent, cooperated with Trump in his vicious anti-immigrant crackdown, expanded the repressive powers of the national-security apparatus, and threatened or criminalized workers' struggles, including the 2018 postal workers' strike.

In April and May, the unions held a series of closed-door consultations with the federal Liberal government and big business lobby groups that resulted in the unions assuming responsibility for forcing workers back into unsafe workplaces. The longer-term purpose of their corporatist alliance was summed up in a joint article by Canadian Labour Congress President Hassan Yussuff and Perrin Beatty, head of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. It stated that rising "public deficits" and the need to remain "globally competitive" would pose challenges for "a trading nation like ours" to secure "economic recovery." A key priority of the partners, it continued, must be to prevent "stakeholders going off in different directions"—i.e., blocking working-class opposition to the ruling elite's homicidal back-to-work policy, and to its efforts to make the working class pay for the pandemic through further austerity and economic restructuring.

Whether it was meatpacking workers forced back on the job following massive virus outbreaks, or teachers opposed to the dangerous and unsafe reopening of schools, the unions have rejected out of hand any "illegal" job action. And when the Trudeau government announced in late August that it was ending the CERB and would force laid-off workers onto Employment Insurance so as to facilitate state authorities' coercing workers back into low-wage jobs, the unions hailed it as a "victory."

Giving NDP leader Singh his marching orders, Yussuff declared shortly thereafter that the NDP had an "obligation" to keep cooperating with the Liberal government.

The "cooperation" between the Trudeau government, trade unions and NDP is based on deepening the exploitation of the working class to boost the profitability and "global competitiveness" of Canadian capitalism. Unifor has spent recent weeks negotiating job-cutting agreements with automakers Ford and Fiat-Chrysler that are predicated on the federal and Ontario provincial governments handing hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies to these giant corporations so they can continue their hefty payouts to shareholders while restructuring the auto industry at workers' expense. The carmakers' plans to transition to electric vehicle production are bound up with a major assault on workers' rights and wages, which Unifor is a partner in enforcing. Unifor

head Jerry Dias made this clear by proclaiming at a joint press conference with Trudeau, Ontario's hard-right premier, Doug Ford, and Ford Canada's chief executive, "We're all rowing in the same direction."

Indeed, the unions are literally pleading for billions in public funds to be handed over to companies that have eliminated tens of thousands of jobs over recent months. In early October, Unifor convened an event with the Airline Pilots Association to call for \$7 billion in direct financial support to be provided to major airlines like Air Canada and WestJet, which have laid off well over 30,000 workers between them.

Rooted in capitalism and the nation state, the unions insist that workers' jobs and living standards must be subordinated to investor profit. Even amid a health and socioeconomic emergency they adamantly oppose any measures that challenge the vise-like hold the capitalist elite holds over socioeconomic life, whether it be by expropriating a portion of their wealth or placing key sectors of the economy under public ownership and the democratic control of working people.

It is only within this context that the vehemence of Yussuff's remark about the NDP's "obligation" to support the government can be understood. The union bureaucracy is painfully aware that Canada, like every other major capitalist country, is a social powder keg waiting to explode. Under conditions of mass layoffs and the further enrichment of the fabulously wealthy super-rich, the unions, together with a significant faction of the ruling elite, believe that the best way to suppress the class struggle and impose the back-to-work drive is through a Liberal/trade union/NDP alliance.

If a humane and scientific response to the pandemic that saves lives and protects workers' jobs and incomes is to be implemented, everything depends on the working class intervening independently with its own program based on a political struggle against this corporatist and nationalist alliance. Workers should demand the shutdown of all nonessential production and an end to in-person teaching until the pandemic is under control; full pay for all laid-off workers; and the impounding of the vast wealth of the super-rich, so it can be redirected to health care and other basic social needs. These necessary demands can be achieved only through the political mobilization of the working class in struggle against the capitalist system and its defenders in the trade unions and NDP.



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