

Canada's pandemic election, the resurgence of working class struggle and the fight for socialism

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
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Canada's September 20 federal election is unfolding amid a global pandemic that has demonstrated the irreconcilable conflict between the ruling capitalist oligarchy, its political representatives and selfish class interests, and the most basic needs of working people. Throughout the pandemic, the Canadian ruling class, like its counterparts in the US and Europe, has systematically prioritized safeguarding and augmenting its profits and wealth over saving lives, resulting in recurring waves of mass infection and death.

The fourth wave of COVID-19 now ravaging Canada could well prove the cruelest and most lethal to date, with children—who compromise almost half of the unvaccinated—especially at risk from the more virulent Delta variant. Since August 1, daily new infections have risen almost six-fold to more than 4,300 per day. The cross-country reopening of schools to in-class instruction will further accelerate the virus's spread. Already Alberta hospitals have their highest ever number of COVID ICU patients.

In their relentless push to "reopen" the economy and let the virus run rampant, Canada's federal Liberal government and its provincial counterparts from across the official political spectrum are sacrificing working people on the altar of capitalist profit-making. They are acting at the behest of big business, which is adamant that the working class must pay for the more than \$650 billion the Trudeau Liberal government and Bank of Canada funnelled into the financial markets and coffers of corporate Canada at the beginning of the pandemic to bail out the ultra-rich.

Acting as a trigger event, the pandemic has exacerbated a systemic crisis of world capitalism and all the maladies that arise from it—social inequality, imperialist aggression and great-power conflict, and the ever-widening attacks on workers' democratic and social rights. It has sharpened the fundamental contradictions of global capitalism that led to two world wars in the last century. As in the 1930s, bourgeois democracy is collapsing as the rival national-based capitalist cliques, Canada's included, seek a way out by intensifying capitalist exploitation at home and increasing their power and access to markets and resources through trade wars, bullying and military aggression.

This systemic crisis is also providing the objective impulse for an upsurge of class struggle across the globe. Workers are being propelled into bitter battles to claw back the past four decades of attacks on wages, benefits and jobs, and to protect their health and very lives under conditions of a raging pandemic. Teachers from Brazil to Britain have resisted the reckless reopening of schools as the virus continues to surge, while mass protests against social inequality and poverty have rocked Colombia, India and Poland in recent months. In North America, autoworkers at Volvo Trucks and Dana in the United States, miners at Vale in Sudbury, Ontario, and Olymel meatpackers in Vallée-Jonction, Quebec, have waged courageous struggles to oppose company-dictated

concessions.

The mobilization of the international working class as an independent political force in the fight for workers power and the socialist reorganization of society is the only progressive way out of the escalating social, economic, geopolitical and environmental catastrophe. The task of the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International is to infuse the growing working class upsurge with a socialist-internationalist perspective, and provide it with a revolutionary strategy and leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the failure of capitalism

COVID-19 has killed more than 27,300 Canadians according to the official count. But a recent Royal Society of Canada study of excess COVID-19-related death reveals the true tally to be closer to 50,000. This is greater than any mass casualty event in Canadian history, save the influenza pandemic of 1918 and the two world wars.

Yet none of the parties contesting next Monday's election are ready to raise, let alone answer, the most basic questions: Why was Canada woefully unprepared for a pandemic that was both foreseeable and foreseen? Why did the federal and provincial governments take no significant action till the second week of March 2020, and this under conditions where the public health care system was known to be in shambles as a result of decades of savage austerity? Why have they systematically opposed a science-based strategy to eliminate the deadly virus and sabotaged lockdowns and other vital public health measures?

Instead, the party leaders are staging a sham debate over the pandemic. The opposition parties denounce Trudeau for his reckless decision to plunge the country into a pandemic election, while he calls out Conservative leader Erin O'Toole for his dog-whistle appeals to the anti-vaccination, anti-mask far-right. Thereby they obscure the essential agreement among all five parties: all support herding children into cramped school classrooms and dismantling the few remaining social distancing measures as the fourth wave surges.

The overriding aim of the parties' mock political combat over COVID-19 is to prevent exposure and examination of the pandemic for what it is—a social crime perpetrated by capitalist elites around the world, above all those of the imperialist powers of North America and Europe.

Because they are viewed as an impediment to the accumulation of profit, capitalist governments have refused to take the measures necessary to contain and eliminate the virus—mass testing, contact-tracing, a huge injection of resources into the health care system, the closure of all

nonessential businesses and schools and the provision of full wages so working people can shelter at home and look after their families until the virus is suppressed. Rather they have prescribed mass infection and death, by pursuing herd immunity or mitigation measures that are aimed merely at somewhat slowing the virus's transmission, under the macabre motto the "cure can't be worse than the disease."

Vaccinations are vital. But outside the mobilization of the world's resources in a science-driven collaborative effort to eradicate COVID-19, the virus will continue to spread, wreaking carnage especially in the lesser-developed countries, and spinning off new deadlier, vaccine-resistant variants.

The past 20 months have conclusively shown that the fight against the virus is a political struggle that can and will only be spearheaded by the international working class.

Oppose Canadian imperialism and the Canada-US military-strategic alliance

Just as the establishment parties are united in prioritizing profits over human lives, so they are united in upholding the predatory interests of Canadian imperialism and strengthening the reactionary Canada-US military-strategic alliance that has been the cornerstone of its global strategy for the past eight decades.

All support the Liberals' plans to purchase new fleets of warships and fighter jets and increase annual military spending by 70 percent over ten years to nearly \$33 billion per annum by 2026. The NDP's only complaint, as spelled out in its election platform, is that "Liberal and Conservative cuts and mismanagement" have left "our military ... with outdated equipment, inadequate support and an unclear strategic mandate."

From O'Toole to the NDP's Jagmeet Singh, the party leaders all rushed to deplore the overthrow of the US puppet regime in Afghanistan after 20 years of US-NATO occupation, a brutal counterinsurgency war that killed tens of thousands of civilians, and the expenditure of well over \$2 trillion. Their laments for the women and girls of Afghanistan resound with cynicism and hypocrisy. They have shed no such tears for the hundreds of thousands killed, millions displaced and entire societies razed by the imperialist wars that Washington has waged, with Canada's support and participation, across the greater Middle East for three decades.

If American imperialism's Afghan debacle has shaken and angered Canada's political establishment, it is because it attests to the enormous weakening of its US ally. Moreover, it is a double blow, since Canadian imperialism was massively invested in the Afghan war, its biggest and longest military engagement since World War II and one it celebrated as proof Canada is a "warrior nation."

By withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan, US President Biden intends, as he has publicly vowed, to focus on "strategic competition" with Washington's more powerful rivals, above all China and Russia. The strategists of Canadian imperialism are likewise arguing Ottawa must give Canada greater military heft to pursue its ambitions on the world stage and assist Washington in its reckless pursuit of global hegemony, including through the "modernization" of NORAD and further militarization of the Arctic.

Following in the footsteps of Harper, the Trudeau Liberal government has integrated Canada ever more fully into the US diplomatic, economic and military-strategic offensives against nuclear-armed China and Russia. Yet the opposition parties, and this includes the NDP and Greens, have joined with US congressional leaders, Republican and Democrat alike, to chastise the Trudeau government for being too "conciliatory" to Beijing.

Workers must beware, behind the backs of the population, the capitalist elite is dragging Canada into explosive great-power conflicts whose logic is a global military conflagration.

A chorus of five parties beholden to big business

Whichever party or alliance of parties form the government after September 20, its policies will be determined not by the rhetoric and phony promises of the campaign trail but by the demands of big business and the crisis of global capitalism.

Trudeau has struggled to explain his decision to call a pandemic election. This is because to do so would compel him to admit that he wants to strengthen his parliamentary hand in anticipation of growing popular opposition as his Liberal government pivots to post-pandemic austerity, intensifies its push to enhance the "global competitive" position of Canadian capitalism and must make good on its promises to Washington of increased support in its imperialist intrigues and wars.

The Conservatives have benefited from the corporate media's amplification of their fraudulent claims to have "moved toward the centre." No matter that O'Toole, a former Harper cabinet minister, won the party leadership by rallying social conservatives and other far-right forces, castigates the Trudeau government for excessive social spending and advocates wholesale privatization of health care. O'Toole touts a purported "pro-worker" agenda, cribbed from Donald Trump and British Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson, that combines "Canada First" economic protectionism with anti-China warmongering.

The Bloc Québécois along with the entire Quebec sovereigntist/nationalist movement has shifted ever further right. It openly proclaims its affinity with the avowedly pro-big business, right-wing populist provincial CAQ government and its chauvinist laws (Bills 9 and 21) targeting immigrants and religious minorities.

The Greens have long acted as a fifth-wheel for the Liberals and like them promote the fight against climate change as a massive business opportunity for Canadian capitalism.

In many respects the campaign of the NDP is the most deceitful of all. Jagmeet Singh has spent the past five weeks lambasting Trudeau as a shill for "the rich" and the corporations who allowed the wealthy to ride out the pandemic in "luxury yachts" while leaving everyone else in "leaky lifeboats." Yet during the preceding 20 months, the NDP, with the full-throated backing of the trade unions, was responsible for keeping the Liberals in office as they funneled gargantuan sums to the rich, put working people on poverty-level pandemic relief, and spearheaded the homicidal pandemic back-to-work/back-to-school drive.

Like social-democratic parties the world over, the NDP is an imperialist party that when in office has imposed capitalist austerity and played an integral role in dismantling the limited social welfare measures and public services it once held up as proof capitalism could be "humanized." Singh's "make the rich pay their fair share" rhetoric is entirely in keeping with the NDP's special role as an instrument of the trade union bureaucracy and mouthpiece of the "left" petty bourgeoisie in serving to contain and defuse working class opposition and straitjacket it within parliamentary and protest politics.

The corporatist trade unions and the suppression of class struggle

The trade unions have responded to the greatest capitalist crisis since the

Great Depression of the 1930s by taking their corporatist alliance with big business and the state to a qualitatively new level. This alliance has been long in the making and parallels developments around the world. Incapable of responding progressively to the development of globalized production, the nationally-based, pro-capitalist unions have repudiated any association with class struggle and become ever more directly an industrial police force.

In the name of defending “Canadian” or “Quebec jobs,” the unions have for decades imposed sweeping wage and benefit cuts and restructuring agreements that have decimated jobs. Whenever mass struggles have erupted against the austerity agenda of the ruling class, from BC’s Operation Solidarity in the early 1980s to the anti-Harris mass movement in Ontario during the late 1990s and the 2012 Quebec student strike, the unions have suppressed them.

In response to the pandemic, the unions have developed what former Canadian Labour Congress President Hassan Yussuff labelled a “collaborative front” with corporate Canada against the working class. Giving full voice to its nationalist and corporatist outlook, the CLC proclaims in a slogan plastered across the top of its website, “In Canada, we’ve weathered the pandemic by sticking together and supporting each other.”

The unions have been “sticking together” with corporate executives and financial oligarchs since the beginning of the pandemic, helping them to enforce the murderous back-to-work/back-to-school drive so that big business could continue raking in profits. They have suppressed all worker opposition to the unsafe operation of workplaces and the dangerous reopening of schools, denouncing all talk of strikes and worker job action as “illegal.” Top union bureaucrats on six-figure salaries have lectured workers about their duty to respect the provincial labour relations regimes, which are designed to smother the class struggle and allow big business to impose its dictates behind a veneer of “democratic” and “collective bargaining” legitimacy.

Underscoring how highly the ruling elite values the unions’ services in suppressing worker resistance, even O’Toole has repudiated the union-baiting practiced by the new right Conservative politicians of the past quarter century like Harper, Harris and Hudak, declared himself to be “pro-union,” and advanced proposals to further promote union-management collaboration.

Workers across Canada, in the United States and internationally have begun to openly rebel against the stifling control of the corporate syndicates that call themselves unions. The key task is to transform this militant impulse into a conscious political strategy to break organizationally and politically with the trade union apparatuses and build new organizations of struggle that are orientated to systematically mobilizing the social power of the working class, and forging its international unity against the transnational corporations and imperialism.

The emboldening of the far right and the breakdown of bourgeois democracy

While the ruling class can depend on the unswerving loyalty of the unions and New Democrats in suppressing the class struggle, a growing section of the elite is cultivating and promoting far-right forces to confront the threat of mass working class opposition more aggressively.

The federal election campaign has witnessed a series of virulent and menacing protests launched by right-wing extremists, anti-vaxxers and outright fascists. They have targeted rallies held by Trudeau and health care workers and institutions. These media-hyped events, which have rarely involved more than a few hundred thugs and backward elements,

have been used shamelessly to create the impression that the far right enjoys significant popular support.

In reality its support comes from the top, from the political and financial elites and elements within the state apparatus, like the army reservist who tried to assassinate Trudeau in July 2020. Moreover, the far right has been emboldened by the ruling class’ longstanding promotion of reaction, including militarism, chauvinism, Islamophobia, and, during the pandemic, blithe indifference to mass death, especially among the most vulnerable.

Sections of the ruling class have now begun grooming the People’s Party of Canada (PPC), the far-right party founded by former Conservative cabinet minister Maxime Bernier, for a larger role. Failed media mogul Conrad Black has hailed Bernier as “the most impressive party leader,” and a senior *Globe and Mail* columnist called this week for PPC candidates to be elected next Monday because “populist right-wing parties are prominently represented” in other countries’ legislatures.

The attempt to cast the far right as a legitimate part of the political establishment expresses the advanced decay of bourgeois democracy. Canada’s governments routinely criminalize strikes, and are increasingly using the anti-democratic “notwithstanding” clause to attack democratic rights. Trudeau postures as a defender of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and touts his Liberals a “democratic” bulwark against right-wing populism and the far right. But his government has spent the past six years shredding democratic and social rights, collaborating with the fascist-minded Trump and ruthlessly pursuing Canadian imperialist interests around the world. Moreover, his so-called “democratic” international allies, like Merkel in Germany and Macron in France, are breaking with core democratic norms. Merkel’s Grand Coalition facilitated the emergence of the fascist Alternative for Germany as the official opposition in parliament, and has adopted its key policies on refugees and the coronavirus pandemic.

The high point to date of the turn by the bourgeoisie around the world to far-right forms of rule was the January 6 attempted coup in the United States. The storming of the Capitol by fascistic thugs seeking to prevent Biden’s certification as president was directed by Trump and supported by much of the Republican Party leadership and sections of the national security apparatus. The Democrats responded by covering up the role of the Republicans and appealing for “unity” with the coup plotters. In Canada, the ruling elite responded with silence to Trump’s open coup preparations in the months leading up to January 6, a clear indication that Ottawa would have no qualms about cooperating with a dictatorial regime in Washington.

The defence of democratic rights depends above all on the mass political mobilization of the working class in the struggle for socialism. It is the suppression of working class struggle by the unions and NDP and their connivance in big business’ class war assault that opens the door for the far-right to gain in strength.

Workers need their own party

To oppose the ruling elite’s murderous response to the pandemic, its preparations for imperialist war, turn to authoritarian forms of rule and far-right forces, and use of the unions to smother the class struggle, workers need their own party. This party must fight to politically unify working people across all racial, regional, linguistic and other artificial divisions promoted by the ruling elite by advancing a socialist and internationalist program. It must implacably reject all forms of identity politics, which express the interests of a small privileged layer of the middle class, and Canadian and Quebec nationalism, the twin ideologies of Canada’s ruling

elite. That party is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Canadian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The SEP calls on workers to form rank-and-file committees in every workplace and neighbourhood so as to create the organizational forms and provide political leadership to the coming struggles. Since these struggles can only be successful to the extent that they are unified across national borders and in direct opposition to the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions, the SEP urges all workers to support the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Sustaining this network of committees and arming working people with a political perspective for victory is possible only by constructing a socialist leadership within the working class. This is the chief task to which the SEP is devoted. The SEP fights to win workers in Canada to the program of world socialist revolution—the program which animated the 1917 Russian Revolution and the struggle waged by Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition against its Stalinist degeneration, and that the Fourth International has defended and developed since its founding in 1938. The implementation of this program demands the unification of the struggles of Canadian workers with those of their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and internationally in a common fight to establish workers governments committed to socialist policies and the United Socialist States of North America.



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