

Canada's social democrats in talks on 3-year deal to prop up Trudeau Liberal government

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The chiefs of staff of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jagmeet Singh are reportedly holding talks on a “confidence and supply” agreement under which Canada’s social democrats would publicly pledge to prop up the minority Liberal government for the next three years.

With their respective bosses’ blessings, Trudeau’s chief of staff, Katie Telford, and her NDP counterpart, Jennifer Howard, have held discussions on the possibility and parameters of such a governmental alliance, *La presse* reported this week.

The Montreal daily added that it had been able to independently confirm via multiple sources an October 29 *Maclean’s* magazine report titled “Liberal and NDP officials mull over a potential deal.” According to *La presse*, an NDP source who confirmed “informal” negotiations are underway said that their outcome is uncertain, “There is a long way to go from the cup to the lips.”

A “confidence and supply” agreement would be one short step away from a formal Liberal-NDP coalition government. It would entail the NDP pledging to support the government till the fall of 2024 on all confidence votes, including all Throne Speeches and budgets, thereby ensuring the big business Liberals have the votes needed to remain in office, in exchange for Liberal commitments concerning their legislative agenda.

Should the Liberals and NDP conclude such an agreement it will invariably be promoted as a “progressive alliance” devoted to fighting climate change and improving working people’s lives. The same or another NDP insider told *La presse*, “The objective ... is to work with the government to get concrete results for Canadians.”

In reality, a Liberal-NDP governmental alliance will be an instrument for advancing the interests of Canadian big business, at home and abroad, under conditions of the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression and second imperialist world war.

With the full-throated support of the unions, the NDP served as the principal prop of the Trudeau Liberal government in the last (December 2019 to August 2021) parliament as it supervised implementation of the ruling class’s homicidal profit-before-lives response to the pandemic and expanded Canada’s participation in Washington’s incendiary military-strategic offensives against China and Russia.

Trudeau called a federal election in the midst of the pandemic’s fourth wave for September 20 with the aim of winning a parliamentary majority, so his government would have a stronger

hand. A stronger hand in pivoting from emergency pandemic economic stimulus and support to austerity, and in aggressively pursuing Canadian imperialism’s predatory interests on the world stage. The day before Trudeau triggered the federal election, his government announced an agreement with Washington to “modernize” NORAD, the Canada-US aerospace and maritime defence command, for 21st Century great-power competition and conflict.

However, Trudeau’s election gambit failed. After six years in office, the Liberals’ phony identity politics-laced “progressive” appeals have long passed their best-before date. The Liberal vote-share fell to just 32.6 percent, with the Conservatives winning a larger share of the popular vote (33.7 percent) for the second election in a row. In so far as the Liberals were able to win a plurality of seats, it was because a section of working people remain susceptible to the claim—relentlessly promoted by the trade unions and NDP—that the Liberals represent a “progressive alternative” or at least a “lesser evil” to the Conservatives. In fact, all the establishment parties, the NDP included, are beholden to big business. The Canadian ruling class’s traditional party of national government, the Liberals have long used the Conservatives as a right-wing foil, the better to implement the agenda of big business.

It is not just the parliamentary arithmetic that is causing Trudeau and his Liberals to seek a more enduring and formal partnership with the NDP, which, notwithstanding the increasingly close ties between the Liberals and the union officialdom, remains the principal party of the trade union bureaucracy.

The proposed Liberal-NDP governmental alliance is a response to, and a mechanism for, suppressing growing social opposition from the working class. Recent months have seen a wave of strikes involving broad sections of the working class, including Vale, Rio-Tinto, and Arcelor-Mittal miners and smelter workers, Quebec food processing workers, and Quebec daycare workers. More than 20,000 New Brunswick public sector workers are now in their second week of strike action against poverty wages and government demands for further pension cuts.

These and numerous other workers struggles are being fueled by anger over the ruling class’s prioritizing of profit over lives, which has led to four devastating pandemic waves, rising inflation, and decades of capitalist austerity and ever widening social inequality. Moreover, they intersect with and are being propelled forward by a resurgence of class struggle internationally. Workers in the United

States, with whom Canadian workers have traditions of joint struggle stretching back more than a century-and-a-half, have launched their largest strike wave in decades and are in open rebellion against the corporatist trade unions which, as in Canada, have enforced concessions and job cuts for decades.

Trudeau calculates a governmental alliance with the NDP—an alliance in which the trade unions will be an unofficial third party—will not only provide his government with “progressive” political cover for its right-wing policies and remove the threat of it being toppled by a sudden defeat in a parliamentary vote. Such an alliance will enable the government to deploy the unions, which have played the pivotal role in enforcing the drive to “reopen the economy” amid the pandemic, even more systematically to suppress working class opposition. And do so under conditions where Canadian imperialism is intent on restructuring class relations at the expense of working people, to enhance its “competitive” and geostrategic position.

For their part, the unions are eager to play this role. During the pandemic, they have dramatically expanded their corporatist partnership with big business and the state. They and the NDP supported the massive bailout of big business and ultra-rich investors in the first weeks of the pandemic, and the subsequent back-to-work/back-to-school drive. In the fall of 2020, Unifor imposed concessionary contracts on workers at the Detroit Three that will allow them to massively expand their low-paid, multi-tier and temporary workforces as part of a deal with the federal and Ontario governments and the automakers to secure a place for Canadian capitalism in the production of electric vehicles. Not incidentally, Unifor, the country’s largest industrial union, issued a statement immediately after the September 20 election in which it explicitly called for the Liberals and NDP to form some type of governmental alliance to “deliver stability for at least three years, while delivering the changes needed to help working people.”

According to *La presse*, it was the Liberals that initiated that current negotiations on a three-year “confidence and supply” agreement. Be that as it may, Jagmeet Singh and the New Democrats have long been oriented to serving as junior partners with the Liberals. In late July, Singh took the extraordinary step of writing to the Governor-General to plead with her to use her arbitrary powers to deny a Liberal request for an election, on the grounds that the NDP had been and was ready to continue propping up the Trudeau government.

In 2008, in the immediate aftermath of the greatest financial crash since the Great Depression, the NDP signed an abortive coalition deal with the Liberals. It called for the social democrats to serve in a Liberal-led government committed to austerity budgets, implementing a \$50 billion tax cut for big business and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

Now, 13 years later—under conditions where the crisis of global capitalism is far deeper, as evidenced by governments’ refusal to fight the pandemic, the surge in great-power conflict and the massive buildup of debt—the social democrats, with the support of their union bureaucrat allies, are again seeking to effectively join a Liberal government that will be tasked with making the working class pay for the crisis.

Working people must be on guard. A conspiracy is afoot. Behind

the backs of the population the NDP politicians and union leaders are integrating themselves still more fully into the assault on the working class.

Any claim that a Liberal-NDP governmental alliance will adopt genuine social reforms, let alone reforms akin to those implemented by the Pearson minority Liberal government of the 1960s, is absurd. The systemic crisis of global capitalism precludes it. What the union bureaucrats are willing to promote as “progressive” change was exemplified this week, when Unifor President Jerry Dias and Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) President “Smokey” Thomas appeared alongside hard-right Ontario Premier Doug Ford at his press conference announcing a 65-cent increase in the provincial minimum wage to \$15 per hour, three years after he rolled it back to \$14.

No less preposterous is the suggestion an NDP-Liberal governmental alliance will advance the fight against climate change, a global problem that like the pandemic cannot be seriously addressed because it conflicts with the profit and geopolitical needs of the capitalists.

Where the Trudeau Liberal government is heading has already been underlined by its principal actions in the weeks since the September 20 election. It canceled the Canada Recovery Benefit, with two days’ notice, leaving almost a million unemployed or under-employed Canadians in the lurch; and, to signal that it intends to adopt a still more aggressive policy against China, it sent a warship through the Taiwan Strait as part of a highly provocative US-led “freedom of navigation” exercise.

Whether the Liberals and NDP strike a “confidence and supply” agreement remains to be seen. Any agreement would in all likelihood have to be finalized before parliament reconvenes on November 22.

Undoubtedly there are sections of big business that believe Trudeau didn’t move fast enough in canceling pandemic relief for working people and that overall, his government is not aggressive enough in asserting their class interests. These sections can be expected to vehemently oppose the Liberals relying still more on the support of the NDP and unions.

Trudeau, for his part, may ultimately conclude that it is better to proceed as he did in the last parliament, when he relied on the NDP for the most part, but at times brokered deals with the Bloc Québécois and, on certain issues vital to the ruling class, the Conservatives.

Whatever the fate of the current NDP-Liberal talks, they have underscored that the fight against the Liberal government, the pandemic, and the austerity and pro-war agenda of Canada’s ruling elite requires the development of an independent political movement of the working class in opposition to the pro-capitalist union apparatuses and the NDP.



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