

After propping up Canada's Liberal government for years, the NDP's Singh accuses Trudeau of “waging war” against workers

Roger Jordan
30 January 2023

In a speech delivered January 17 to the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) parliamentary caucus, party leader Jagmeet Singh accused Canada's Liberal government of “waging war” on the working class. According to the Canadian Press, Singh declared, “If you work a job in this country, you shouldn't go hungry. ... You can't even find cold medicine for your children. Right now it feels like this war against workers.”

To be sure, the Liberal government's public spending cuts, support for inflation-driven real wage cuts, deadly response to the pandemic and frontline role in the US-NATO war against Russia constitute a “war” on working people.

But Singh neglected to mention a “trifle”—With the full-throated backing of the trade unions, the NDP has been propping up the minority Liberal government for years and since March 2022 has been in a formal governmental alliance with them.

If one can describe Trudeau and his ministers as the generals of the army waging the capitalists' class war, Singh, the NDP caucus and the bureaucrats who staff the union apparatus comprise the junior officer corps.

The trade unions have served as a key pillar of the Trudeau government since it first won election in 2015. At the unions' behest, the NDP began directly supporting the Liberal government after it failed to secure a parliamentary majority in the 2019 federal election. The subsequent three years witnessed a massive escalation of the ruling elite's class war assault on working people, beginning with the huge \$650 billion bailout for the banks and big business at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The period of the NDP's support for the Trudeau government includes: the imposition of the profits-before-lives pandemic back-to-work campaign, which resulted in tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths; the preparations for and launching of a war against Russia, including intimate collaboration with far-right Ukrainian nationalists and the provision of virtually unlimited resources to the military; and the enforcement of “post-pandemic” austerity.

In late 2021, shortly after the NDP, with strong union encouragement, began talks with the Liberals on a “confidence-and-supply” agreement committing the NDP to keeping the

Liberals in office till 2025, Trudeau responded to the emergence of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 by abandoning almost all efforts to stop the spread of the deadly virus. As Singh stood beside Trudeau in March 2022 to announce the finalization of their deal, the Trudeau government was in the midst of overseeing the dismantling of all remaining public health measures as the ruling elite embraced the program of the far-right “Freedom Convoy.” The consequences were devastating for working people, with 2022 being the deadliest year of the pandemic in Canada with close to 20,000 official COVID-19 deaths.

The 10 months of the “confidence-and-supply” agreement have witnessed the Trudeau government pivot to “post-pandemic” austerity to claw back the hundreds of billions it handed to the financial oligarchy at the beginning of the pandemic from workers and public services. This has been accompanied by explicit support from Trudeau and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland for the Bank of Canada's sharp interest rate increases, which are aimed at throwing the economy into recession so as to slash labour costs and boost corporate profits.

The attacks on workers and public spending carried out by the union-backed Liberal government with the NDP's support are seen as necessary to fund their reckless program of military rearmament and the escalation of the US-led NATO war on Russia. Since the US-provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Trudeau government has supplied over \$1.1 billion in military aid to the far-right Ukrainian regime. At the same time, the government is implementing a 73 percent defence spending increase from 2017 levels by 2026. This increase, which amounts to a defence budget of around \$32 billion compared to \$19 billion in 2017, does not include the tens of billions of dollars Ottawa has committed to upgrading the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) over the next two decades. The modernization of NORAD aims to integrate Canada more fully into Washington's plans to wage “great-power strategic conflict” with Russia and China, including with nuclear weapons.

The NDP has been at the forefront in championing this insane explosion of militarism. Leading NDP politicians have fully

endorsed Canada's weapons supplies to Ukraine and its leading role in integrating fascist militias into the country's armed forces. They have also urged the Trudeau government to take a harder line towards China. One of the few criticisms made by the NDP, which has been amplified by the trade unions, is that Canada should have a stronger national defence industry, i.e., should be more self-sufficient in producing its own weapons of death and destruction, so as to better pursue its imperialist interests around the world.

Singh's pose of outrage over the war being waged on workers is all the more cynical given the fact that he deliberately avoided saying a single word about the leading role his union allies have played in it. In the lead-up to the 2019 federal election, both Unifor and the Canadian Federation of Teachers allowed Trudeau to address their conventions to make a re-election pitch, and the unions spent millions of dollars in the subsequent campaign to help reelect the Liberals. When Trudeau was reelected at the head of a minority government, Unifor and the rest of the bureaucracy enthused that the NDP held "the balance of power."

During the pandemic, the unions were instrumental in imposing the ruling elite's back-to-work/back-to-school campaign, including by denouncing any collective job action on the part of workers opposing dangerous working conditions as "illegal."

The unions seized on the pandemic to qualitatively deepen their corporatist ties with the Liberal government. CLC head Hassan Yussuf, who would later be appointed to the Senate by Trudeau for services rendered to the ruling class, infamously declared in early 2020 that what Canada needed was a "collaborative front" between employers and unions to get through the pandemic and ensure Canadian capitalism came out on top in the post-pandemic struggle for global markets and profits. The consequences of this collaboration in prioritizing corporate profits over human lives are well known. While more than 50,000 people have died in the successive waves of mass COVID-19 infections caused by the premature reopening of the economy, corporate profits have reached record heights. There has been a simultaneous explosion of social inequality, with billionaire wealth soaring, while workers' living standards have been ravaged by inadequate COVID-19 relief and the biggest burst of inflation in decades.

The unions waxed lyrical over Singh's deal with Trudeau in March 2022. The CLC's statement began with the declaration, "Canada's unions celebrate today's historic agreement," while Unifor "congratulated" the NDP.

Singh concluded his caucus speech, which won a standing ovation from the assembled MPs, by vowing, "This NDP caucus is going to fight like hell for workers and families."

To the extent that such bogus posturing achieves any traction, it is thanks to the pseudo-left organizations like Fightback, Socialist Action and the International Socialists, who continue to proclaim the NDP to be a "mass labour" or "working-class" party. Fightback, whose members conduct their activities as fully paid-up members of the NDP, maintains the absurd position that Canada's pro-austerity, pro-war social democratic party can be transformed into an instrument of the working class to fight the "bosses," even advance the struggle for socialism. The Canadian section of the misnamed International Marxist Tendency could never bring itself to condemn in principle the NDP's entering into a governmental

alliance with the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's traditional preferred party of national government. Instead, in one of the very rare articles they have written on the subject, Fightback leader Alex Grant merely took Singh to task for failing to negotiate better terms for the NDP giving its votes to the government.

More significant still is the pseudoleft's radio silence on the enthusiastic support given by the trade union bureaucracy to the Liberal/NDP alliance. The unions have not only been a key pillar of support for the Trudeau government since 2015, but they have intervened time and again to sabotage workers' opposition to savage austerity, wage cutting and the homicidal pandemic policy. Last fall, when 55,000 education support staff defied the hard-right Ford government's draconian strike ban in Ontario, triggering widespread calls throughout the working class for a general strike, leading representatives from Canada's major unions stepped in to scuttle the strike without even consulting the workers. Fightback rushed to defend the union bureaucrats in the face of widespread rank-and-file anger with the slanderous claim that workers were "not ready" for a general strike against Ford.

A January 26 statement from CLC President Bea Bruske underscored how the unions see themselves as saboteurs-in-chief of workers' struggles. Writing in the *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece of Canada's Bay Street financial elite, Bruske warned her wealthy audience that the unions' services would be indispensable in avoiding a "winter of discontent" as in Britain. Bluntly speaking the language of the privileged middle class layers who populate the union bureaucracy, Bruske asserted that "the last thing Canadians want right now is labour unrest across the country." To avoid this nightmare scenario, she urged corporations and governments at all levels to accept "greater balance in the economy" by way of a "strengthened labour movement."

What Bruske means is a strengthened partnership between the state, big business and the union bureaucracy for which she speaks to smother working class opposition to declining living standards, austerity and war.

The only thing workers can expect Singh and the NDP to "fight like hell" for is the preservation of the kind of pro-war, pro-austerity alliance advocated by Bruske. It is this Liberal/NDP/union alliance that is the chief political barrier to the emergence of working class opposition to social inequality, miserable working conditions and imperialist war. The struggle against it necessitates a decisive political break by working people from the unions and NDP and the adoption of the socialist and internationalist perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact